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MORE THAN A PROPHET

More Than A Prophet



By
Lloyd Cassel Douglas

Chicago
W. B. Conkey Company

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To My Wife

"What went ye out into the wilderness to see? * * * A prophet? Yea, I say unto you,—and more than a prophet! * * *

"Among them that are born of women, there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist; notwithstanding, he that is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he."

Jesus Christ.

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PART I

CHAPTER I

AT THE ALTAR OF INCENSE

The great congregation stirred uneasily, and a few of the younger worshippers timidly raised their eyes, curious to learn the cause of the delay.

The heavy pall of incense smoke, torn like a decaying tapestry, had drifted through the corridors, and yet the veil was not parted. Save for the flickering lights on the golden candlestick, there was no evidence that a service was in progress.

Though the elder Jews remained with bowed heads and downcast eyes, their curiosity had supplanted their devotion quite as thoroughly as the same impulse had led their juniors to look up anxiously toward the veil, the parting of which had been expected while the smoke of incense still hung in clouds above the waiting congregation. Too long a time had elapsed for any mind, however concentrated on the day's devotion, to remain undisturbed by this violation of an iron-clad ritual, and when at last the heavy veil was nervously, noiselessly drawn aside, the tardy priest gazed upon wondering faces instead of piously bowed heads.

There was now no impulse on the part of the worshippers to resume the attitude of devotion; for curiosity, rather than being satisfied at the appearance of the vested Levite, fed and grew at the sight of his pale, parted lips and terror-stricken countenance.

Tottering forward, with faltering footsteps, such as neither age nor fear singly could produce, the old priest heavily raised his arms in benediction. Infected by this unwonted look of fear, the talismanic sign for prayer was disregarded for the first time in the remembrance of temple devotees.

The white lips were moving. Had they emitted an anguished wail, or pronounced an anathema most deadly, there had been a quick sigh of relief from the waiting worshippers; but the dumb lips gave forth no sound. The trembling fringes fell in folds as the priest's arms dropped to his sides as though smitten with palsy. A whisper grew into a subdued murmur as each Israelite scanned his neighbor's face in search of a probable explanation for this unusual sight; and the younger ones said, "The man is dumb!" but their fathers bowed their heads gravely, and whispered, "He hath seen a vision!"

The sons of Levi's sons were many. In the earliest days of the theocracy it had been determined that human supplication for Divine mercy must be made by priestly intervention. So systematized was this peculiar government and so detailed to its minutest particular, that the

office and province of no one man in Israel transgressed the function of another. Did Israel war, his warriors planned and executed the campaign; did Israel sing, his minstrels led his choruses; was Israel taught, his prophets unrolled the parchments; when Israel worshipped, his priests unerringly followed the time-worn ritual.

It was the spirit of the East to know no change. What the pride of progress is to the Occident, that the conservatism of custom was to the Orient. Regulations, civic, moral and religious, were not conformable to given times; and true to this principle, the Levites, though hundreds in number, divided and subdivided the duties originally placed in the hands of him to whom this line of priests looked backward for lineage and appointment.

Like the machine ushered into the industrial world with but a single wooden wheel, to be supplanted by more wheels and better, to be harnessed with springs and shafts and cunningly devised adjustments, yet performing, in its completed state, but more of the same kind of work originally wrought, so the priestly office in Israel remained unchanged as to function, though its functionaries formed a not inconsiderable portion of Jewish constituency.

Had the High Priest been told, in the days when Israel dwelt in tents, that were placed at his disposal several hundred men among whom he must divide, with absolute equality, the duties pertaining to ritualistic worship, it might have caused that worthy no little anxiety as to the

manner of making such division of sacred labor. But as Levi's sons grew more numerous their work grew less arduous, until now, in the days of Jewish decadence, to each Levite was doled a series of tasks which, though few in number, were freighted with importance no less than in the earliest hours of this Order's institution.

The Jew, with his fondness for the perfect number—seven—must have regarded it providential that for this many days, annually, each Levite became one of a company of priests to officiate in the sacred courts on Mt. Zion. There were, however, some few duties pertaining to Israelitish priest-craft whose seldom recurrence compelled their performers to be selected in a special manner. Thus it was that he who sprinkled incense on the altar in the Holy Place gained such appointment by lot, his chance election debarring him from similar future honor.

Only one among hundreds, then, was the white-haired priest, from the hill-country of Judea; yet this year's ministration in the temple was of signal importance to Zacharias. For the first time, and the last, his was the right to part the veil and closet himself beside the sacred altar which was Israel's shrine, and the earthly abiding-place of Israel's God. Few honors had come to this man save those to which he had been entitled by his birth. Even the boon of a successor had been denied him, and he found himself tottering to the grave with none to perpetuate his name. Just what this meant to an Israelite,

more especially to a Levite, can scarcely be estimated unless one takes careful cognizance of the Jewish people and the prophecies concerning them. The remoteness of his home from the center of Judaism placed Zacharias out of touch with national politics; nor did he know much of moment concerning current Israel, which he might have known had he dwelt in the Holy City; but from Caiaphas to the youngest surplice-wearer, there was no man in Judea in closer touch with Jehovah; nor was there one better versed in the ritual through which this Deity was worshipped. Not a detail of Levitical duty but he knew by heart; not a pending prophecy, however mysteriously couched in the symbolic phraseology of sacred authorship, but he looked forward to its literal fulfillment. There was, then, none more fit, of all the sons of Levi, for entrance into the terrestrial dwelling-place of Him Whose Name dared not be spoken.

The psalms of praise had ended; and the crowning feature of the service remained to close the day's devotion. A hush fell upon the congregation as the aged priest retreated to the Holy Place, reverently drawing aside the veil, as one might enter a closely shuttered room where lay the cold resemblance to a loved one from whom no word need be expected. The veil resumed its duty to secrecy, and Zacharias found himself beside the altar. Though for the first time in this hallowed place, its appointments were neither new nor strange to the man

who had lived in the Levitical ritual. Awed by the privilege and responsibility, which for years he had anticipated, and which for years he would remember, the priest nervously stretched forth his hand and sprinkled the incense it contained upon the altar's perpetual fire.

The dreamer and the mystic may devise a wraith in a cloud which seems real, though known to be imaginary; but Zacharias, being neither a dreamer nor a mystic, knew that the vision he beheld at the shrine was just what it appeared to be—the form of an angel. No drifting smoke, however weird, could take such shape. Had the devout Jew been accosted, in his little vineyard on the Judean hills, by a Celestial form, he would have fallen to his knees in abject terror; but so exalted was his conception of the altar to which he had timidly made approach that the angel's appearance seemed but in keeping with the place. The Jew, by nature, was a seer. His memory of his fathers' visions placed him in a receptive attitude toward heavenly visitations. Expectantly, therefore, the old priest awaited the message which, clearly, was the object of his supernatural visitant. For a long time the silence hung as heavy as the incense clouds. Without the veil, the congregation grew impatient for the return of the man in sacerdotal robes. The smoke had lifted, and sifted through the thick curtains that walled the sacred room.

"Thy prayer is heard!" The angel was speaking.

No need to ask "What prayer?" for though the burden of the old man's supplications knew the weight of sorrow for Israel's coming thralldom, there was one petition quite apart from civic affairs—a petition which had so impregnated his being that the very thought of Jehovah and the idea of prayer wrung from his soul a cry for the one great favor of his heart's desire. "*Thy prayers*" might have meant the daily imploration for temporal blessings and the peace of Israel, but "*Thy prayer*" meant the perpetual yearning for a son.

Proceeding quietly and quickly, as if the words were memorized, the messenger explained the nature of this gift. The promised child was to be honored by Jehovah; he was to be the herald of the coming Messiah; was to assume the Nazarite vow, and live the austere life prescribed by such obligation; he was to come in the spirit and power of Elias (whatever that might mean); he was to make ready the people for the advent of the long-expected King.

At the first pause, the priest found voice to question the tidings. Realizing the physical impossibility of the gift, and with a Jew's natural desire for a surety, Zacharias asked a sign, the granting of which would confirm the reality of the messenger and the truth of the message. The disappointed angel obeyed the request. Until "these things shall have been fulfilled" he was to speak no word. This, then, was the sign of answered prayer,

and this the penalty for listless faith, that together spread an ashen hue over the old man's face; and when, after hearing the words that sealed his lips, he raised his eyes to meet those of his companion, they were gone, and he was alone at the shrine.

Clutching the veil for support, it yielded, and he stepped forward to pronounce the benediction. With an effort he raised his nerveless arms, and when he would speak the words so often spoken and so well learned no sound passed his lips.

And in the great congregation the younger ones said, "The man is dumb!" But their fathers bowed their heads gravely and whispered, "He hath seen a vision!"

CHAPTER II

IN THE ARBOR

Twilight had fallen over a sacred Sabbath on the Judean hills. From the little arbor, just outside the latticed window, an aged woman had marked the slow declension of an autumnal sun, and as the last crimson streaks lifted from the bronzed slope which stretched toward the west into the valley and darkness came to close the day, the lonely watcher arose, heavily, and turned to enter the house.

The gloom revealed the shadowy form of a man moving rapidly up the slope toward the cottage, and again the woman sank into the arbor-seat. A young man drew near, and seeing the solitary occupant of the nook, paused, with the conventional salutation, "Peace be upon this house!"

"And upon thee," the woman rejoined, timidly, for she had not yet recognized her guest.

"Thou speakest to thy cousin Miriam's son," the stranger continued. "We came from the Holy City yesterday and did but arrive in Hebron before gate-closing last night. I thought to come straightway to thee, but it was too late. All through this day I have wished I might come, but dared not, as thou knowest, till sunset. I have strange words for thine ears."

"Thou art welcome, O son of Miriam. Thou art panting with thy fast journey. Didst run these three miles?" the aged woman asked with a relative's tender solicitation.

"Aye; the gate-keeper tarried and I was delayed," explained the messenger; then, continuing, "We of my father's house attended temple service yesterday. 'Tis of this I would speak to thee."

"Didst see thine old uncle in his robes? Ah, my cousin, I fear his days are numbered. I did but mark how slow his footsteps and how he trembled when he started on his journey. Seemed he well?"

Ignoring the questions, the young man went on, nervously, "Zacharias entered the Holy Place yesterday—"

"The desire of his heart!" the woman cried, joyfully. "Now am I rejoiced that the lot did fall to him this time; for, as I tell thee, I fear he shall never again visit the temple."

"And when we did expect him to come forth," the other continued, heedless of the interruption, "he tarried long, and we feared he mayest have fallen at the altar."

"Speed thy words! Did he fall?"

"He came out after a time, woman; but when he would pronounce the benediction, he spake no words, though his lips moved; and my father saith, 'He hath seen a vision at the altar.'"

"Didst thou not speak to thine uncle afterward? Told

he not what vision he had seen?" queried the anxious wife.

"He did not speak," the young man answered, slowly; "nor did he hear our questions. Seemed he as one in a dream."

The form of the infirm woman was convulsed with sobs. Then, brokenly, amid her wails, "And I can not go to him," she cried, "Oh, that the Lord had blessed me with a child who could bring his old father home! How great is the curse with which He hath cursed me!" Then, appealingly, "Do thou, O son of Miriam," she pleaded, "go to the Holy City and bring thine afflicted uncle here. Say thou wilt go!"

"Trouble not thyself so greatly," comforted the messenger. "Perhaps it is but a passing thing—this affliction. He may have spoken by now. I shall go and bring him to thee. Stay thy tears, woman, Jah reigns; He doth not smite them that love Him. I go to-morrow to Jerusalem. Peace to thee!"

"And unto thee!" the other responded, tearfully.

Long she watched the stalwart figure disappearing down the dusky hillside; then arose and slowly entered the house, weeping.

The sun was already high the next day when Elisabeth awoke, for sleep had delayed long in coming, and claimed the early morning hours. The full import of the message of the night came into her mental vision as the troubled

woman beheld the day, now far advanced. Rising hastily, she prepared her simple meal, and then, with loving care, made ready a pallet in the little sitting-room. Linen reserved for special occasions, perhaps for an honored guest, perchance for more somber use, was taken from its hiding-place and unfolded reverently. It took a long time for the enfeebled woman to prepare this bed. She was making it ready for the one she loved more dearly than her own life.

The hours dragged on wearily, and now the sun's disk was notched by the summit of a distant hill; now twilight deepened into shadow; now night had come, and with it hours of restless tossing and soul-sick yearning by her who waited in the lonely cottage. Another morning's light beamed at length and another day doled out its hours with grudging hand. The evening would bring the smitten priest.

Again in the little arbor-seat, which commanded a view of the valley, the weary watcher saw two forms far in the distance—one straight and agile, the other bent and tottering, leaning heavily upon a staff for every step. With a cry the woman rose and toiled down the slope to meet them.

The young man stepped aside and looked away, not so much to hide his blinding tears as to avoid the sacrilege of witnessing the meeting. Elisabeth flung her arms around the old man's neck and buried her face in his

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flowing beard, crying, "Zacharias, Zacharias, what hath come to thee? Speak to me! Art thou ill?"

The priest tenderly took the quivering form in his arms and bowed his head. The son of Miriam gently released the hand of its grasp on the dumb man's shoulder and said, softly, "He doth not hear thee. Come, let us go to the house. He is very weary."

There was silence in the cottage. The aged pair, now alone, sat with hands clasped; the stronger meditating, the weaker weeping, quietly. Long-continued custom does not surrender easily, whatever the conditions. The hour for retiring had come. For half a hundred years, at this time in the evening, Elisabeth had drawn the tiny table, with its tiny lamp, close to the priest's chair; had handed him the parchments; had sat quietly while he read aloud from the Law and the Prophets. And so to-night she drew the table close and brought the parchments to Zacharias.

The action seemed to lift the old man from his reverie. Motioning to his wife to sit near him, he unrolled the sacred documents, selected one with deliberation and, having manifestly found the passage sought, handed the roll to Elisabeth.

She read, laboriously, a story of long ago; a story of a childless pair to whom an angel had come with a promise that their hearts should be made happy by the advent of

a son. As she finished reading of the joy of that old mother, Elisabeth raised her tearful eyes, inquiringly, to meet her husband's. He traced the lines with a trembling finger till he found the name "Sarah;" then pointed, ominously, to his companion.

She caught his meaning quickly and grasping his hand broke forth in a flood of questions, to which the old man replied by mutely shaking his head and touching his soundless ears.

Meanwhile the priest was searching in another roll of papyri, and soon handed Elisabeth a marked quotation, from which she read, "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.' "

While the woman studied the words, Zacharias again took the first-used roll and with a finger on the name "Isaac," he pointed, with his unoccupied hand, to "The voice of him that crieth."

The priest then arose, impulsively, and proceeded with a pathetic pantomime, in which he reverently approached the little table; sprinkled the imaginary contents of his hand upon the flickering blaze of the tiny lamp; then devoutly pointed upward; then touched his dumb lips.

And Elisabeth knew.

The hill-dwellers had long since ceased to marvel or attempt explanation for the priest's affliction. Many and

varied had been the theories concerning it when the story of the temple scene had drifted to their ears, to be confirmed by the reappearance of the silent man. What had once been a mystery had grown quite commonplace; for time so dulls the edge of curiosity that it leaves off trying to cleave a mystery; yes, better—time covers mysteries as daisies cover graves. No less strange than the Levite's affliction had been the seclusion of this man's aged wife; and, failing to discern a reason for the silence of the one and the retirement of the other, their neighbors merely pronounced them an eccentric old couple, and regarded them with little interest.

Save for an occasional visit from Miriam, the singular pair had been quite alone for this half-year. Life was extremely uneventful for them. With Zacharias, it was as though his senses had been incarcerated for a definite term, to the expiration of which he looked forward anxiously; not only for their release, but for that other, greater joy, divinely promised.

Spring had come, after a lonely winter. With the bursting buds and unfolding leaves about the quiet home had come a guest. She was a beautiful young woman from Nazareth, in Galilee.

Zacharias marveled at the singular attachment between this dark-eyed girl and his white-haired companion—an attachment that seemed to bridge the vast chasm of years, which lay between them, with a common bond. Their

first meeting, to which he had been a silent witness, was marked by an animated conversation. Never had he seen such wondrous happiness as shone on the faces of these women. They were together almost constantly thereafter, during the young woman's visit, and always happy—even ecstatic.

The priest spent his time either meditating, with half-closed eyes and bowed head, or conning the parchments. One morning, as he sat in the little arbor-seat with the cherished writings by his side, musing on his favorite theme—the promised child—Elisabeth, coming to the doorway, noticed his pathetic attitude, and, thinking to take away his loneliness by her presence, joined him in the shaded seat, gathering up the sacred parchments to make her room beside him. She took the wrinkled hand that lay upon his knee, and caressed it tenderly with her own, and gazed into his eyes long and lovingly.

The young woman now joined the aged pair and sat at their feet, silently looking away to the northward where the Holy City stood, too far to be seen, save in mental vision.

It was neither the place nor the time for conversation, and after a while the elder woman absently turned the pages of the well-worn manuscripts, as though to manifest her interest in the solace of her husband's dreary days. Her eye fell upon these words: "Unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given—"

Thinking the phrase would carry her thoughts to her afflicted companion and bid him know what was in her mind, she pointed to it, and together they read, silently; nor stopped with the phrase, but continued, “—and the government shall be upon His Shoulder, and His Name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”

With an exclamation of joy that the means had been found by which she might tell Zacharias the great secret she so longed for him to know, Elisabeth gestured toward the pensive figure sitting before them.

And Zacharias knew.

PART II

CHAPTER I

INNOCENCE IN PERIL

"But what more privilege might we have?" The Archangel Elias was speaking. "Our legions obey our slightest wish; nor doth The All-Powerful command aught that is arduous or severe. Until thou sayest this word, no thought of discontent e'er crossed my mind, nor did I dream that Heaven knew one fetter for any soul wrapped in its shadeless light; much less that thou, companion peer, and one of seven mighty rulers of this clime, whose will bows to no will, save that of The All-Powerful, shouldst fret 'gainst such authority."

The mildly chiding words claimed answer, and the Ambitious broke forth afresh with his seduction.

"Concerning privilege and power, I grant that ours know no confines, save—as thou hast spoken it—The All-Powerful's will; nor doth this will alone ask mine unwilling toil; but all this glorying, and this homage so perpetual—what comes of it? And how doth He Whose Name is lauded thus gain benefit? Are not our instant answerings of His call, our ready granting of His

merest wish enough, that He must yet demand continual praise for privilege to do His will?

"And more, Elias, I would have thee bear in mind concerning our condition. We are invested with a power than which no higher we dare know, unless—"

"Unless!" Elias interrupted. "Why sayest thou 'unless,' Beelzebub? Dost seek a higher power than that thou hast admitted highest in angelic right? Wouldst claim the throne of The All-Powerful?"

Quickly the other answered, "But half a truth have I confided; and since thou blamest me with plans so traitorous, I'll speak my mind quite freely. Did but The All-Powerful rule, and were His Name alone the object of our adoration, my discontent had been as far from me as thine to thee."

"I see thy meaning," said Elias, "thou frettest 'gainst the worship of The Son; yet why that Spirit, all so gentle and sincere, should cause thy mind to know one thought save that of love, I, knowing Him, can not discern. My legions deem His worship their delight; nor hath it been a test to mine own willingness to cast my crown before His throne."

Beelzebub replied, impatiently, "Mighty we are called—we, of the Archangelic power; yet when doth any word or song confirm such attribute? Hast ever known a note of praise, Elias?"

Reflectively, the listener made reply: "I never sought a

share of adoration; but since thou askest me the question, and dost stand expectantly awaiting answer—No!”

“Hast ever known reward,” Beelzebub continued, “more high than that which vests itself in privilege to praise the will, whose granted mandates might have given it claim?”

“Knowest thou no solace for thy discontent?” asked the devout Archangel. “Dost thou, through all eternity, expect to bow before the throne of Him Whose Name thou takest on thy lips in terms irreverent; and wilt thou sacrifice the joy that might be thine, but for this galling praise? Hast thou a plan to soothe thy sore unrest?”

The speech was followed by a silence; for, though fully ripe the intent of the Angel, words had never yet been uttered which should tell the base designs, long since conceived, and born, and nurtured in that traitorous mind. And then, half hesitant, with carefully measured terms, as if recalling some ill-learned oration, the author of Heaven’s first and only sorrow told his plan.

“The very power thou hast ascribed to us, Elias, breeds discontent in me; for were we limited to those small faculties which angels of our legions know, and were there steps as numerous upward to that throne for us as for these lesser angels, we, the ambitious, might with smiles dispel the thought of ascent.

“But when one step alone remains to place us where the crowns are cast, our restlessness need not seem

strange. I would, then, that we use the very power which, unrewarded, frets our souls."

"Hast ever spoken thine intent to them?" Elias slowly questioned.

"Dost mean the other five?" the Treacherous One rejoined. "I thought to seek thine audience first, Elias. Thy judgment I respect above the others, and what thou sayest of this plan, whether thou advise or disapprove, determines all."

A feeling, new and strange, surged in the soul of him who hitherto had known no word of praise. This credit to his judgment, this exaltation of his words above the judgment and the words of those five peers usurped a lodgment where it wound its tiny roots around his purity.

With searching eyes, the Wicked One scanned anxiously the other's face to note his words' effect and, satisfied with what was there revealed, proceeded slowly with his heinous plan.

"To us have been entrusted all the tasks, all execution of the duties of this realm. They are unchanged, and we know well the times of their recurrence; how they're wrought, and their necessity; and yet we wait the word that bids performance of these duties, known of old; yea, more—do stand expectantly, with casted crowns and heads bowed low, to learn the manner and the time in which they're wrought. I challenge thee, Elias. tell me when, within thy long remembrance, we were told of such new

duty, yet unlearned, since first the day these duties were assigned; or when we wrought them in a manner new, or at a time unripe. We are but now proceeding toward the throne; dost know our purpose?"

Quite well Elias knew the object of the mission, and, at the words of the seducer, smiled, unconsciously admitting that he knew.

"I leave it to thy judgment," Beelzebub resumed, "could not thy pending duty be performed without this ord for which thou makest journey?"

The question was not answered, for the throne was reached, and for the first time in his long, angelic reign, Elias found his thoughts unconcentrated on the praise he sang.

The worship having ended, and the great commands which issued from the central radiance having been received, the mighty legions, led by those whose minds were far from adoration, turned and followed through the shimmering light to guard the gates—their occasional tasks; and once more soaring, circling near, the Traitorous Angel came to make the journey mean with his insidious plot.

Unhappy, restless, though with curiosity intense, Elias met the approach, half shrinking.

"Sayest thou naught, companion peer, concerning that I have confided? I wait thy judgment of this thing most anxiously."

Elias meditated long before replying; then, tremblingly, he asked, "What wouldst thou do?"

Approaching nearer, that the treacherous words might reach no ears save those for which intended, the Wicked One, now deeming the hour meet for action, proceeded thus: "Since thine anxiety's increase to learn my thoughts regarding our advancement, I'll tell thee, simply. I would that on the throne, where we have cast our crowns reluctantly, might sit one of our number, who, with impartiality, should share his homage; and whose the arduous task of reigning where the rule consists of sharing, more than wearing, regal power shalt thou suggest, whose faultless judgment knows no equal in this realm."

"Since 'tis thy plan," Elias answered, falteringly, "who better, of our peers, might fill the place than thou, whose thoughts most lovingly do turn to thy companions' praise?"

"Thou doest me much honor, O Elias! For thy words I give thee thanks; yet mine had rather be the place that humbly takes allotted share of worship than the mighty task of making such allotment."

To one whose mind had been so far from guile, and whose simplicity disarmed him, such apparent self-renunciation seemed sublime; and now the Angel, once so pure, all-yielding to the lying flatterer's wiles, stepped in the well-laid trap.

"Thou art the one, Beelzebub, on whom this task—as

thou hast pleased to call the occupancy of a throne—should rest. Full satisfied shall I be with thy reign.”

And now, arriving at the gate where Elias and his legions resumed guard, the Demon, with his hosts, pursued the course along the mighty wall to reach the gate they would defend. Thus did the plotters separate—the one all jubilant with wicked joy—the other trembling, sad; for Conscience, though it unreturns the blow dealt in its quiet face, makes such a mighty stirring in the soul, as, screening with its arms its streaming eyes, it lacerates the tiny confines of its cell till every rock and timber of its temple moves.

CHAPTER II

VICTORIOUS RETREAT

"One word with thee, loved Gabriel!"

Beelzebub, his legions having stationed in their wonted place near one of the twelve gates which break the adamantine wall, had sped with silent swiftness through the light to seek another member of The Seven.

Such visitation, to and fro, by those to those commanders of the legions, was not unusual; and when the plotting Angel paused where Gabriel, issuing orders to his hosts, towered high above them—heavenly hero that he was—and scanned their lines with vigilance intent, the busy Angel raised his eyes and smiled a welcome.

"One word with thee, loved Gabriel!"

"I wait thy word," the other said, withdrawing from his station that he might give private audience.

"Elias doth suggest to me, but now, with what half-heartedness my legions sing the praise of The All-Powerful's Son. So ardent my devotion at His throne, I had not known this; and till now no thought possessed me that one soul in this vast realm would dare withhold a note of praise from Him Whose glorious Name I worship and adore. And so to thee, loved Gabriel, I come to ask if thou, in thy devotions at the throne didst ever witness in

mine hosts the slightest listlessness in praise, or if thou hast remarked irreverence among them."

The Splendid Angel stood all glittering with light. So pure he was, the words seemed strange that told of feeble praise; as if the very mention of such wrong were, in itself, a wrong. He merely mutely stared, and shook his head.

"Thou givest me much joy, loved Gabriel. Perchance Elias erred; and, in his zeal that all might fitly praise The All-Powerful's Son, misjudged the wonted worship of mine hosts. E'er since he told me this, half fearing his suspicion true, have I searched earnestly my thoughts for some poor motive to incite my legions' shame."

"And searched in vain!" replied the other, sternly.

"Aye, Gabriel; what motive might there be for such ingratitude? Could they be tiring of His praise Whom The All-Powerful proclaims exalted King? Such might be their fancied reason, whilst to us this homage ever grows in beauty and in power.

"One other thought comes to me now, on instant. I know not how mine hosts regard their leader, nor with what fondness he is held in their esteem; but I have noted how thy legions look on thee, O Gabriel, and with what great devotion they await thy merest wish; and if so be that any angels of our legions tire of worship at the throne, might it be possible that they do love their leaders so unwisely that they long for some slight homage to be paid them?"

'Beelzebub, thy fancy doth suggest to thee strange things!

"Most true have been thy words which tell of the devotion of our hosts; yet this sincere obedience to their leaders' call is but the love they bear the word which summons them to their Creator's praise. We are but leaders! Of the promised power invested in The Seven, they little know; nor do we know—we, in whose keeping doth repose this higher quality.

"Dost bring to mind the words of our appointment; how The All-Powerful proclaimed that, added to our leadership of legions, there should be a knowledge of the finite, which should grant us power to see beyond this realm? I have not passed a gate since first that mandate came from Him that I have not, with steadfast gaze, looked far into the abyss that doth surround this wall, and yet have nothing seen but darkest shadow.

"And, though, at each returning to the gate which my loved legions sometimes guard, I pause and peer without to see if yet this finite realm is added to the glorious works of Him Whose praise we sing, adoringly—until the day when first our eyes behold such hitherto unseen and unknown clime, I but a leader am, and count the privilege of praising The All-Powerful and His Son my highest joy, my province, my reward! And if, as thou hast said, my hosts obey my call most readily, 'tis but because that call doth ever summon them to songs of mightiest praise."

There was a pause before the Traitor answered.

"'Tis well," he said, at length, "I know Elias erred, and that this love our legions bear those in whose keeping is reposed the leadership of their devotions, is but the affection for the word that calls them to The All-Powerful's praise. So think no more, loved Gabriel, on this; and do thou grant thy pardon, now besought, that I should thus disturb thy mind with fears unwarranted.

"Whilst thou wert speaking of the Archangelic power, a thought most strange came o'er my mind—a thought I ne'er possessed before. So full of sweet content my soul hath been, and so submissive to The All-Powerful's will, it never hath occurred to me, till now, that we, whose power is unconfined, might rule this realm conjointly, did we seek such wondrous honor. I know not, Gabriel, why this thought hath come to me; 'twas but an idle fancy, thou must know, and ne'er shall it recur. Hadst ever thought of this, companion? Thou saidst my fancy doth suggest strange things; perhaps this is but one; and though it is my highest joy to do The All-Powerful's will and worship at His throne, it is a satisfaction to my mind to think that I do give this praise, not urgently, nor by some dread command, but with a power that might withhold such homage, and with single grasp could clutch the rule of all this realm. Doth not this thought commend thee to thyself, O Gabriel; that thy love is volunteered, and that, if thou but sayest the word, such love thou mightst withhold?"

The answer was a single clarion call that summoned all the legions of this station, from whence, with flight most swift, they, with their leader, hastened to the throne; for never, in the memory of minds, temptation has been turned aside through argument. There is, and always has been, but one refuge from temptation's wiles. 'Tis found in swift, unerring flight to The All-Powerful's throne.

CHAPTER III

THE MYSTIC MESSAGE

Abashed and maddened at the abrupt end put to the interview with Gabriel, the Traitorous Angel, following slowly in the wake of all this glorious throng, reflected thus in rage: "Now, by my ambition, am I bound to carry out my plan! Continue babbling forth thy praise, thou much insulted spirit; nor cease thy songs; but, by thy very notes of homage, I shall see thee cast thy crown unwillingly at mine own feet! So fearful thou of adoration, thine ears refuse its mention; since thou hatest it, thou shalt not know its burden. Now to the others! Let them dismiss me if they dare!

"But why need I seek judgment of their minds? By the combined force of all those legions which but wait the bidding of Elias and of me, there need not be more might. For if the others—Michael, Raphael, Uriel, Adriel—suspect mine intent and treat my counsel as doth Gabriel, the attack, howe'er well planned, would meet their strong resistance.

"By The All-Powerful's throne, I shall not counsel them!"

Beelzebub had now drawn near the station where his legions stood on guard, and summoning them with loud

command, made ready a throne journey, which, begun, veered from its course, and passed the gate securely guarded by the commandery of Elias. The leader paused, when near this station, and was joined by him who, with his legions, had already formed for flight on mission similar to that which led the Demon and his hosts to quit their post.

So quiet was the conversation of their leaders that the angels paid no heed; but with thoughts intent upon the adoration which they went to pay before the throne eternal, they passed no word nor sign.

"Do thou not speak to Gabriel of this matter," said the Traitor, "for though he sees the wisdom of our plan, and did most willingly give ear to that we contemplate, he hath misjudged the intent of our thinking and doth oppose the reign of Seven. He urgeth 'twould be far better and more wisely ordered if the rule, instead of resting with the Seven, should fall to him, whose legions far surpass in numbers and in might those of his compeers.

"Thou knowest, O Elias, that this thought doth show unworthiness in him; and how his mind hath such a selfish plan conceived, I durst not think.

"He seeks thee soon to speak to thee about this matter. Thus he told me at our parting, and when thou tellest him thou canst not grant an audience to such treacherous words, thou wilt but anger him; but if he meditate upon

his erring counsel ere he speaks, he may renounce his plan and voice a fitter thought.

"'Tis wisdom, then, for thee, Elias, that thou shouldst find thyself too much engrossed in holy duties to give audience to Gabriel till he hath had time for pondering; and since I have spoken to him of this matter, and am better able to remark his reconsideration, do thou, if thou wilt, await my word to grant him audience."

The Troubled Spirit sighed, and sadly said, "Sooner would I distrust my sight or doubt my hearing than believe that Gabriel, highly favored of the Seven, should know one thought of selfishness, or claim one tiny atom of another's right. Didst thou mistake? Art sure he spake those words?"

"As surely," said Beelzebub, "as that I've told thee truly concerning my designs."

The throne was reached; the praise was sung; and now the legions, withdrawing in an ever-widening circle, grouped each at the direction of its leader, and departed—the phalanx of Elias leading all the mighty army as it broke into great fragments, each to seek its wonted task.

No sooner had his legions reached their station than Elias, gazing tremblingly about, with frightened mien, saw a splendid form approaching, unattended. Beelzebub had told him truly, then, of Gabriel's intention; for the nearing Angel was none else than he, whose coming had been heralded. Should the much-dismayed Elias wait the

Archangel's visit, a plea for audience must be granted. One only course remained, save that, and such a course meant flight. So, turning in an opposite direction, as if unconscious of the mighty Angel's advent, he started on some lately fancied errand to the gate where Adriel's legions stood on guard.

Gabriel, observing the departure, unthinking that it held a motive so inhospitable, with graceful detour 'round the stationed hosts continued on his journey, expecting soon to join Elias and find opportunity for secret audience.

Elias, ne'er before pursued, and now most earnestly against his will, increased his speed, increasing thus the distance from his follower. Gabriel, surprised that any errand, save those sent from The All-Powerful, should demand such haste, made swift his flight. And thus pursuer and pursued rushed on like two great tempest blasts; neared, reached and passed the hosts of Adriel; nor with less swiftness neared and reached and passed the gate where Raphael and his legions stood. The next gate had for its guard the forces of the Traitor Angel.

The very errand that had moved the pursuing Gabriel to take up his flight was such that asked a conference in which Beelzebub had no share; so, quickening his already wondrous speed, the mighty Gabriel neared the fleeing Angel, calling him, "Elias, I would speak to thee!"

It may have been the guilty fear, it may have been the

fright of long pursuit that kept Elias steadfast on his course; for, though he heard the words, he neither turned nor spoke.

The glittering legions of Beelzebub were now in sight, and Gabriel slowly circled from his course, and wounded, shamed, recovered his long journey, while Elias halted just without the limits of the Demon, wishing he had answered Gabriel; and long he tarried there, while in his mind re-echoed that earnest, anxious cry, "Elias, I would speak to thee!" and though the words were fresh from Gabriel's voice, they seemed to come from far, borne on winged winds from The All-Powerful's throne.

Elias followed slowly in the course of his erstwhile pursuer till he reached the gate where his own legions stood.

Without the line, an angel of his hosts awaited his approach.

"Whilst thou wert gone," he said, "one came to me, and beckoning me come near him, gave me this message: 'Say to thy leader—Elias, I would speak to thee!'"

"Who was this messenger?" Elias asked, in apprehension.

"I knew him not," came the reply.

"Dost know the Archangel Gabriel?" asked the leader.

"Aye, perfectly!" the angel answered.

"Was this not Gabriel?"

"I knew him not!"

CHAPTER IV

THE CLAIM OF CONSCIENCE

The peace that long had reigned in this Archangel's soul was gone. Though confident still, that he, whose planning for a change of government Celestial, was prompted but by love for those who shared his Arch-angelic power, the thought of ruling and receiving praise, than filling him with zeal to urge such claim had rather grown distasteful to Elias.

If but the dim prospective of such power should take away that sweet content which he had erstwhile known, its realization could but make him all the unhappier; and on the heel of discontent did closely follow an Intrigue which, coming clothed in the fair garb of innocence, cast its untarnished robes the while it ran, and showed itself more meanly clad; and if the Angel's gaze failed to remark the swiftly flying Intrigue's dress, 'twas but his innocent simplicity that clad the form with garments fair which hid the girdle dyed in treachery.

Elias had become bewildered and amazed at other similar flying forms which pressed him close on either side, which followed and preceded him till every thought and every move did but the more surround him with Intrigues, which never travel singly or alone.

The caution against audience with Gabriel seemed plausible and right; and if he heeded the words which held such calm advice, he found these flying forms of use, and summoned them to his assistance. Thus it had been that Gabriel's approach demanded of Elias, if he heeded the injunction, a summons to these swift Intrigues to solve the problem now presented; and, as they gathered at his side—most willing servants, they—but two, of all the company, seemed prepared to meet this instant question, the one demanding truth surrender, the other urging flight. And when the words came ringing clear that from the voice of Gabriel called, despite the hurried course, once more the Intrigues offered aid which stabbed a heavenly friendship to the heart and sent one Angel wounded from the place, and then returned the other, shamed and sad.

But Intrigues, while they offer a solution which postpones the inevitable demand of equity, found it not in their province to propose a plan to clear the mystery of that call, borne by a Stranger to the victim's hosts—peremptory, yet unsubscribed.

When Intrigues shake their heads and turn away, admitting themselves nonplused for a plan; when, withdrawing from the mystery the last-tried key which fails to move the subtly fastened bolt, they bid adieu and step from out the troubled throne-room of the mind, there's hope—and not till then—that he whose restless spirit

seeks repose may scan their motley garb so earnestly that through the filmy gauze he sees their robe of treachery.

Unhappiest soul within the pearly gates, the Troubled Angel formed his waiting legions and prepared them for another visitation of the throne; and, as he went about those oft-repeated duties, he could hear, as though the words kept calling from afar, the message the significance of which filled him with such anxiety. How strangely they had sounded when he knew that Gabriel had spoken them! How they had echoed in his mind through that long journey to his gate! They seemed more than mere words. Reverberating in the chambers of his soul, they cried and called, and sobbed beseechingly.

Once he resolved to go straightway to Gabriel and confess the wrong done to their friendship; but even this confession, seen in prospect, offered such small comfort to his mind he put away the resolution. So ominous did seem the words which sounded and resounded in his soul, that Gabriel and his call were quite apart from them.

They rang along the pavement white; they echoed 'gainst the wall; they flooded through the open gate; they faintly drifted with the songs proceeding from the throne, "Elias, I would speak to thee!"

The preparation now complete, the heavenly company at the gate with quietness moved forth to offer praise. The words, which formed the only conscious thought of him who led these legions, more loud and more insistent

grew as that great space between him and the throne was lessened by the angels' flight. 'Twas vainly that Elias tried to soothe his anguished spirit with the thought that these beseeching words were Gabriel's alone; and though he reasoned with himself that his unhappiness and restlessness had wrought some strange delusion o'er his mind, his mental argument led to no clear conclusion.

The throne was neared, and for the first time in his long remembrance this Angel's wonted feeling of reverential awe was changed to intense fear. And when his legions smote their harps and raised their heavenly voices high in adoration glorious, he trembled in that burst of praise, while guilty fear and fearful guilt came o'er his soul.

The throbbing notes of homage died away, and, at their leader's word, the forces of Elias turned to take their accustomed task, well knowing that the dual principle of heavenly love asks work as well as prayer.

The guard was stationed at the gate, and all his present tasks complete, Elias, drawing quite apart, sought solitude for thought. But meditation had for him no solace.

The ever-echoing words would not give place, but more and more beseeching called till, anguished, he uprose and sobbing, cried, "I come to Thee!"

CHAPTER V

THE THRONE OF TREACHERY

Beelzebub, already drunk with power, which seemed but waiting his insidious grasp, had, as a prelude to the songs he longed to hear in which his name should be the constant theme, bade his musicians lay aside their harps, and, with a scornful leer, commanded them to take their flaming swords instead and carve from ever-vernal trees a throne from which he might enforce his stern commands.

Two vast, rough beams were cut, and hewn, and mortised at his base direction; the one exceeding twice the other's length; the shorter beam securely fastened at its center to the beam superior, at a distance from one end but half the shorter's length. When it was thus completed, the device afforded a broad dias where the beams were mortised. 'Twas here the Traitor sat. The chosen of his legions might stand guard on either side and to his rear upon this same pavilion, while stretched before him, at great length, the rostrum where his legions, advancing at his call, might there present themselves as vassals.

At first, the innovation caused surprise among the Demon's hosts; but thinking calm submission highest virtue, they raised no question, nor inquired what

brought about the change which gave such domineering rule to him who long had uttered his commands with kindly voice. And as their leader grew in arrogance, and with pomp and sternness ordered them as serfs instead of members of the King's command, these outraged angels caught the mutinous infection. Where once their concourse had been held in love, now disputation, with its fretting, querulous guile, came in their midst to breed distrust and brew an anarchy corrupt. But, long accustomed to obey their leader's slightest wish, these hosts, now fully ripe for sin, prepared thus by Beelzebub's crime, regarded his commands unfalteringly.

The despot's frown, which had displaced his sometime smile, deepened and darkened as he saw from his self-reared pavilion a spectacle most singular.

Dashing through the clear, white light, with speed unusual, came a Being whom he recognized on instant as the Archangel Elias. Startled with the fear that such incredible swiftness must bring tidings of disaster to his cherished, wicked plans, he waited quite impatiently his apparent guest. More mystified and startled than before, Beelzebub now witnessed Gabriel's advent.

At first it seemed that, armed with haste, Elias brought important tidings; then, as the second Angel came in sight, it seemed that each made this his goal, yet brought two messages, since each came singly.

At length, the second Angel quickened his flight as

though pursuing him that led. Beelzebub now grimly smiled, and waited the result of this unusual race. The Demon knew full well its meaning. Gabriel sought Elias to question him and warn him 'gainst the Traitor.

Expecting that a moment would conclude the flight of these Archangels, and that, with trembling forms, they would dash past his far out-posted guards and hurl themselves within his limits, his surprise was boundless when he saw both Angels slowly turn and retrace their course.

Beelzebub thought gravely on the problem, and his reasoning led him to a definite conclusion. Elias, true to the advice, sought flight to escape an audience with Gabriel; but when he found himself o'ertaken, turned, giving sign to his pursuer to precede him, that the promised interview might not be witnessed.

Quite sure, then, was the Traitor that these Angels, of whom and to whom he had lied so foully, had discussed the situation till the plot was clearly understood by both. When his deceit was manifest to the Archangels, they would go quickly to the throne and tell the story of his treachery. The punishment for Beelzebub's crime would need no further cause to make it just; so, deeming attempted execution of his crippled plans the only hope remaining, the Demon quickly summoned all his legions around his throne and, with a mighty voice, thus spoke to them: "My legions, hear!

"'Tis rumored through the courts of Heaven that your

praise, once fulsome and sincere, hath grown so listless and so weak that are imputed to these hosts base thoughts of treachery. Long have I shielded you and made apology most humble in your stead.

"This thing hath come to The All-Powerful's ear, and He hath said, Whose praise through ages ye have sung, that punishment must fall on you for such bold faithlessness, and 'twas decreed that two Archangels of The Seven should come to announce the conditions of your penalty; nor need ye wait their coming, well-loved legions, since that discernment, granted me at my appointment, which lends me sight to peer within the Mind of Him Whose praise ye sing, knows no need of messengers. A mind that sees The All-Powerful's plans ere they're conceived finds no necessity for words to reveal a thought already known.

"So, I may tell you now your punishment in store. Ye will be taken from this gate, which long ye've guarded with such zealous care, and dashed from off the highest battlements into a dread abyss, where nothing waits you but eternal woe.

" 'Tis time the messengers had come; or perchance they have come, and, viewing such a mighty host, have fearful grown of their own errand and have returned to beg The All-Powerful to allow them company of legions, lest your wrath on hearing condemnation so severe might bid you rend the lips that spake the words."

An angry murmur among the hosts arose to follow this dread message, and little groups of sentinels who had stood, the silent guardians of the distant outposts, held hurried converse till the throng had its attention drawn, and scanned the faces eagerly which formed the conversing parties. The Traitorous Leader, too, seemed interested in this disputation, and, shouting to the nearest guard, who most excited seemed, he charged him thus: "Speak forth thy words, thou murmurer, that all may hear! The angels of these legions have no secrets!"

The guard addressed drew near the throne on which the Demon sat and, making an obeisance, which was only one of many innovations of the Traitor's fancied rule, accepted willingly the chance to speak.

"Oh, thou most worthy seer, and great diviner of The All-Powerful's mind, we, of the outposts, have but seen that which doth truthfully confirm thy words; for, only now, before thy summons called us here, we, guarding, saw two Archangels, the mighty Gabriel and Elias, draw near in haste as bearers of some tidings most portentous.

"But, as thou hast said, they turned at sight of us and fled; and such their evident fright, that he, whose doubtful speed had failed him in the course, retreating, durst not wait the other's coming; nor did pause these flying Angels till my sight failed to behold them."

There could now be no doubt that what the leader said was true and, raging at the All-Powerful. Whose

commands should hurl them from the battlements of Heaven, the legions were now ripe for any intrigue, any crime.

Up rose Beelzebub, with thundering voice, and sharply issued this command: "Since 'tis your high reward for all the homage ye have paid, for all the praises ye have sung, to dash head-downward through the dark, dread chasm that doth surround your long-loved home, prepare yourselves for vengeance meet; and I, though not involved in your dire penalty, shall lead you to the throne, and there, if your obedience, known of old, doth promptly follow each command ye hear, ye shall not merely taste, but drain, the cup of vengeance.

"Make ready, then; and wait my word for our next visitation of the throne, where we shall draw our swords and smite The All-Powerful's Son. Doth this suffice?

"Stay! Would ye foil the penalty prepared for you? Then, when ye see the vacant throne, with mighty shouts and loud acclaim sing forth your leader's praise. Prepare your anthems with this theme, 'Beelzebub reigns!'

"Take but your swords. Hold! Take your harps as well! Await my word!"

CHAPTER VI

THE PENITENT

Elias, having certainly determined to heed the call which now rang in his ears, persistent, pleading, with loving word collected all his legions and standing in their midst, with sorrowing face and downcast eyes, thus spoke to them:

“My legions, hear! I have received a message summoning me to The All-Powerful’s throne. Of such peculiar nature is this call and of such mystery are all the ways of Him Who uttered it, I can not tell what errand may be asked or what intended mission may be planned for me. It might be The All-Powerful’s will to place another at the head of this vast host of angels, and if so be that your command from this time forth rests in another’s hands, do but commend your loving zeal to him as ye have done to me; and may your adoration bear such love to The All-Powerful and His Son that all the angels of this realm shall mark your pure devotion. I have loved you long, my legions, and shall fondly think of you where’er my mission leads. So, till the time we meet again, whene’er that be—farewell!”

His hosts, amazed and saddened at his words, scarce realized their truth ere he was gone for no sooner had

the parting sentence fallen than Elias, with flight most swift, proceeded toward the throne.

He went in fear and yet in joy; in fear because of dread to face Him Whose surpassing love his broken faith had wounded; in joy because the answered call had given him a feeling more akin to peace than he had known since he had listened to the Tempter's voice. And as he made his flight he sobbed his thoughts aloud in anguish:

"Whate'er the punishment may be—where'er I'm sent—whoe'er I am—it matters not, so I may tell my wrong!"

And oft, as if in answer to some far-off call, with arms outstretched and hands clasped, he would cry:

"I come to Thee!"

The mighty hosts of Gabriel were at the throne with songs of adoration when the repentant Angel reached his journey's end. He caught the words of praise and knew that soon a grand amen would close the burst of song. So, waiting just without the limits of these legions, he stood all trembling at the thought that at this throne where crowns were cast he soon would make confession.

So radiant was the Celestial light which emanated from the throne, none, howe'er keen his sight, could see The All-Powerful's form, and though He spoke His Sovereign will none save the Son e'er saw His face. E'en so enveloped in the light was The All-Powerful's Son that adoration at His feet was paid by faith and not by sight. 'Twas known throughout the Courts of Heaven that

such was His peculiar power He might at will traverse
His realm, unknown.

While waiting in the shimmering light, Elias pondered o'er this truth and wondered if the Son now occupied His wonted place—or was He absent on some mission of His own?

The praise of Gabriel's hosts had ended, and Elias, having watched the mighty throng withdraw, now found himself alone, save for one Angel, Who had seemed reluctant to retire. For an instant the Archangel's old-time will impelled him to remind the Tarrying Angel of His duty to His legion. But, remembering his own errand to the throne and how neglected duty led him here, he held his peace.

The Tarrying Angel neared Elias and with eager tones demanded:

"Didst hear the message?"

Elias pondered long before replying; then, recalling the mystery known of old on which he had but recently reflected, he meekly said:

"I come to Thee!"

The Stranger, without further word, advanced and led the way into the wondrous light. Elias followed till the glare e'en blinded his angelic eyes; until he groped his path, while He Whose form preceded vanished from his sight.

There needed no command to stem a sacrilege. Elias

stood, no longer able to advance; then knelt, and screening with his arms his blinded eyes, poured out his full confession.

"O Thou Who rulest through eternity! Whose laws are just and Whose demands are right; behold now at Thy feet, Elias, of the Seven Thou didst ordain to lead Thy legions! Behold in him whom Thou didst fill with purity, impurity most vile! Behold him whom Thou didst clothe with robes of innocence, dressed in the garb of shame! Behold his lips which have for ages sung Thy praise, for they have spoken treachery!

"Thy servant cometh not entreating justice; for to him justice means eternal woe. He cometh asking mercy at Thy throne. O Thou All-Powerful, accept a full confession; and if justice hears the plea Thy sinning servant raiseth, may Thy sweet mercy stay the hand nor let it strike the avenging blow till Thou hast heard the story of his wrong!"

The trembling Angel paused.

A voice of wondrous love which the Repentant recognized spoke softly from the throne:

"What was thy sin?"

"I lent my sanction to a plot, most mutinous and foul—a plot against the loving Spirit Who with Thee doth occupy the throne. Thou hast heard my sin. Now, in Thy loving hands I cast myself. If 'tis Thy will to punish me according to my wrong, Thy will be done! But if

Thy glorious realm doth hold one menial task, one humble occupation whose obscure performance through eternity should give me opportunity to prove the love I've wronged, but bear Thee still, do Thy sweet mercy bid me go, take up the task, nor leave it till the debt is paid."

The All-Powerful made answer:

"He Whom thou wrongest doth intercede for thee. He Whom thou wouldst dethrone doth lend His mercy to thy penitential cry. Thou dost recall the words of thine appointment, how 'twas said that thy discernment should behold the workings of The All-Powerful's will in all His realms. Choose thine own task of penance, and if thou canst not behold in this Celestial realm a mission meet to shrive thy sinning soul, do thou seek further for some task in other realms. A wanderer, thou! Be on thy way! Nor may We see thy face before this throne till thou hast found the task thou deemest fit to right thy wrong!"

Elias rose and turned and left the throne.

The crown he'd cast, as was his wont, lay in the shimmering light. 'Twas thus Archangels cast their crowns when coming to the throne to offer praise, and when the praise was ended and they had turned to go about the tasks to them assigned, again resumed these symbols of the leadership of hosts.

It was with custom's impulse that Elias stooped to take his glistening treasure, and then, remembering the words, "A wanderer, thou," he rose and fled—uncrowned.

CHAPTER VII

AN IRRESISTIBLE LEADER

And now a host drew near the throne, but not to praise. With flaming swords and vengeful cries, they dashed beyond the confines of the throne without which limits 'twas the wont for legions to pay homage. They forced their way, with hideous intent, into the glare of dazzling light which poured forth from the central sun, until its blinding radiance checked their further progress. So intense was this glorious light, the foremost angels of this throng could neither recognize nor see their traitorous comrades.

Though foiled and beaten in their heinous plan, they neither asked for mercy nor confessed their wrong, but, with low mutterings of sullen rage, attempted to retrace their course, while thousands of their sinning company, not yet aware what obstacle retarded their advance, pressed on into the light in great confusion.

No word was uttered from the throne. All now expected some dread judgment to conclude the treacherous invasion.

There seemed to be an impulse leading all to withdraw from the light; so, rushing, hurrying on, with shouts of anger impotent, the legions of Beelzebub fled from the

holy spot, and madly jostling in their flight, pursued their wicked leader.

Far in advance of him they saw a single Angel, Who, with neither harp nor sword, seemed leading the entire commandery. Beelzebub fell back among the wicked angels of his legions, commanding them with frightened voice to halt, nor follow further Him that led; but none obeyed his voice, nor did he heed his own command; for while each angel of the host, Beelzebub included, put forth his mightiest effort to retard his unwilling flight, each faster flew to follow on the Stranger Angel's course.

They neared the gate which had been theirs to guard.

There, by its portal, was the self-reared throne of treachery. On this, the Angel stood, but spoke no word. His right arm was outstretched in gesture of command, His finger pointing to the open gate. The mighty force which drew them on from The All-Powerful's throne, which led their journey to this gate, still moved the legions with a power resistless.

They did not pause; they could not pause; but with loud cries of fear and rage, they fought and struggled 'gainst the power that drew them to the gate. They tore their robes; they flung their harps and swords aside; they clutched each other in their frenzy as they saw the black abyss; then, shrieking, sobbing, dashed headlong into the yawning gulf.

When the last traitor of the hosts had plunged unwill-

ingly into the depths; when the last shriek of terror died away and all was silence at the gate, the Angel dropped His arm, and, with a look of sadness on His face, reflected silently.

This was the entrance gate designed by The All-Powerful's will for the admission of His legions which should come from His yet uncreated realms. It now stood open and unguarded. The Angel walked to its dark threshold and gazed long and steadfastly into the dense, unfathomable darkness just beyond. Long did He stand there pondering; then, with saddened face, He turned away, and once more going to the Traitor's throne, surveyed its queer construction.

There, at the center of the beams, Beelzebub had sat; there was the place at his right hand and his left, where guards had stood in waiting, while to his rear another crew had meekly done his bidding; and there, before the Demon's seat, stretched forth the long pavilion where homage might be paid his wicked name.

The Angel silently observed this sacrilegious thing; then, with a mighty grasp, erected it till those deserted traitorous seats were high aloft; then, raising it upon His shoulders broad, He bore it to the open gate and placed it there, upraised, upon the threshold's center. Then, drawing back from where it stood—a towering sentinel, strangely wrought—regarded it with searching gaze and calmly said, "Though sin hath formed thee with its hands,

thou innocent, unthinking emblem of its shame, thy task shall henceforth be to guard this gate, and whosoever enters here must pass the cross!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE DESERTED GATE

A captain with no company, an aide with no commission, a royal prince without a crown, Elias wandered. And while his sorrow knew no bounds, there entered in his soul a sweet content in place of that dread guilt which, as a mighty burden, he had left before The All-Powerful's throne. Now free to go without command, this Angel, who had never trusted to himself for order or direction, knew neither where nor why to go. If he should linger near the throne the inquiring glances of the hosts which came to pay their homage would only add to his humiliation. His erstwhile legions soon would come to offer praise; he felt quite strangely out of place; it seemed undutiful in him not to return and lead those hosts in their glad journey.

But legions were no longer his to lead. Why had not The All-Powerful taken from His suppliant not only his commission but, as well, removed the power of leadership? Why had He not annulled the words which gave him such appointment, since power, unused, does but recoil and fret the soul of him who bears it?

Uncrowned, without commission, without legions, yet possessing all the power the crown had represented, all

the power the appointment held, all the might of leadership, Elias sadly wandered on.

Could he but bear some message from the throne to distant parts of this great realm; could but this mighty power which surged within his soul find some demand, however small, to give it vent! If The All-Powerful did command some mighty task, or ask him to attune his harp to those which came and went to lead the various legions' praise, and there accompany, without relief, each song sung through eternity; or order him to take a sword and, unattended, guard a gate through all the ages that should come upon the realm Celestial, a mighty throb of joy had bounded in his soul; but no, 'twas not to be! Elias was a wanderer who knew no bidding but his own, who had no task to claim his power, no rightful place in all this clime.

An impulse now possessed this one to make a journey to the gate, the near confines of which had lately been the termination of his hurried flight from Gabriel. The thought brought terror to his soul, that he should still possess desire to seek the Traitor. He did not want to see Beelzebub. And why this impulse now to go on such a journey should possess his mind, he failed to understand, and, as precaution 'gainst such flight, he turned to the direction opposite, to place himself at greater distance from that gate.

On, steadily, he flew, till he could see the distant wall,

with legions posted at its gates; but neither neared nor paused he in his flight, but keeping in the distance the adamantine wall, he traversed it to regions where no errand e'er had led him. But howe'er far he wandered, still resistless impulse did impel his mind to end his journey at the gate where treachery held sway.

Unable longer to withstand the mighty force which led him on, he gave himself, reluctantly, to make the dreaded journey; but with a proneness to postpone a visitation so unwilling, he made his flight most slowly, and 'twas long before he reached that portion of the wall to which this impulse led him.

All trembling with the thought of meeting his seducer, he neared the station, filled with dread. So closely had he now come to the place, he should behold the legions. He stood but now without the outposts, where should guard the mightiest angels of the legions; yet no sentinels were here.

The broad expanse, once filled with hosts, was now deserted, and over all this once securely guarded place, a heavy silence hung.

The empty camp-ground seemed most weird and lonely, but its desolation filled the wanderer with joy. With faster flight, he made his way through the deserted ground and paused before the gate.

One solitary Angel, without harp or sword, stood near its portal, while beside Him towered a mighty beam,

extending high aloft; a massive staff, bisected by a shorter, at no great distance from its farthest height.

The solitary Angel watched Elias' approach, regarding him with keen intent. For some time neither spoke. The gaze of each then turned upon the queer device securely planted at the gate; now their eyes met; and thus the wanderer asked, "Dost know what all this means; this silent place, deserted by the legions, and this strange, roughly-hewn device placed at this open gate?"

The questioned Angel took the other's hand and led him slowly, silently, until they stood upon the threshold; then, pointing downward to the gulf of inky blackness, said, "The legions who were wont to guard this gate have crossed its threshold; hence, the silence of this place.

"The strange device, of which thou hast inquired, is but the emblem of the sin that caused this spot's desertion. The victory of purity is thus proclaimed, and ever shall this symbol be such victory's sign.

"So potent is this emblem's power that he, who would from sin be shriv'n, with loving thoughts must its symbolic form enshrine within his soul's most sacred treasure-house; must look to it with steadfast eyes; must stand beneath its towering arms, if he would seek protection from the will that measures justice, stern.

"For on this emblem, carved by sin, do love and mercy meet, and clasping hands, go forth to save repentant souls."

Elias pondered o'er the words so full of meaning; then raised his eyes to gaze once more at his informant. He was gone.

The wanderer scanned the place most eagerly, but Him he sought had disappeared. A sense of loneliness o'erpowered him as he viewed the vast, deserted station of the legions which had fallen. Recalling then the Stranger's message of the emblem and its power, he once more drew close to its side and touched it with a reverential hand. Long did he stand—how long, he did not know—steadfastly peering outward into the darkness of the gulf.

'Twas with a start, he saw, at length, a slight dispelling of the pall that filled the dread abyss. Black night was quietly withdrawing, pushed aside by gray of dawn! 'Twas but a mist now that obscured the distant radiance; then it, too, passed away, and brightly shone a glorious ball of light, with steady beams revealing, by its beauteous ravs, a new-born world!—a world, whose each appointment did but typify the realm Celestial; and in the fairest spot on this vast sphere, the silent watcher at the gate beheld two beings, fair of face and form, who walked, with hands clasped, through the shade that screened them from the powerful, revealing light.

The wanderer reflected on the sight, and then, aloud, soliloquized: "Thy discernment shall behold the workings of The All-Powerful's will in all His realms!" Thus it was said at my appointment to Archangelic might.

The sphere which now doth take its place belongs to Him; to show the glory of its Maker's power; and if this realm, in whose bright courts I was created, fails to reveal the mission I must seek, it may be that this newer clime will furnish me a task whereby my debt is paid.

"Here, at this gate, I'll stand and gaze upon that other realm, observing closely all there wrought, secure in the protection of this emblem which He said could take away souls' guilt."

CHAPTER IX

THE SHADOW OF THE SYMBOL

The uncrowned Angel at the gate found such an interest in the realm, which promised him a mission to absolve his much repented crime, that these long vigils that he kept passed quickly. He surveyed the mountains and the seas, the hills and plains, the rocks and rivers of the sphere; he watched the giant creatures as they roamed at will among the pathless forests; as they paused to drink from the sequestered waters of the glens. Far up the mountain sides, he saw small, graceful beasts, with footsteps quite unerring, climb o'er the rocks that formed these mighty billows of the ground. Once, while observing, critically, these little creatures at their sport upon the rocks which crowned the hills, Elias saw a form and face he recognized. There, on the topmost crag, which towered above the other boulders at the mountain's height, his massive figure lounging carelessly, reposing for support upon an elbow, steadfastly gazing downward to the valley far below, Beelzebub, the Traitor, sat. So fixed his gaze upon the vale beneath, the careful watcher at the gate looked also to the valley to discern what object had attracted the attention of him whose foul designs wrought only evil. This valley was the fairest garden spot of all the sphere; 'twas here the beings lived whose forms resem-

blance bore to those within the adamantine wall. Elias saw the happy pair beneath the bower they had constructed as their home, and shuddered as he marked the fact that this spot was the object of the Demon's searching gaze. Elias looked again into the valley, pityingly; then once more to the mountain top.

The fiendish form was gone, while on the rock where he had sat, with graceful coils and glittering scales, a hideous monster lay. The Angel watched the thing with loathing fascination; he saw it move, and writhe from off the rock, and marked its swift descending course along the mountain's side. He saw it slipping through the grass which carpeted the vale; nor did his gaze withdraw until the loathsome thing had reached a tree of wondrous beauty near the bower, where, coiling like a spiral around the massive trunk, it slowly drew its length into the foliage.

The sligher of the two fair dwellers in the bower now stood without the tiny home, and upward peered into the branches where the reptile hung; then, turning back, the form retraced its steps, re-entering the bower. The swaying branches of the tree again called his attention who had with earnest gaze beheld the pantomime. Their slimy occupant recoiled itself about the trunk, descended and recovered its long course upward.

Again Elias looked down to the valley, beheld the leafy bower's occupants emerge and, with clasped hands,

walk quickly to the center of the garden, where, by a tree hung heavily with fruit, they paused, and from its branches plucked and ate.

The action seemed so innocent and simple to the watcher that with but little interest he now regarded it; and casting once again his eyes to the high mountain top to see if that repellent form, which, at his last beholding, was slipping stealthily among the rocks, had reached its starting-place. It had. Upon the rock, unmoved, Beelzebub sat.

In the watcher's thoughts were closely linked the appearance of the Traitor with that of the uncanny monster that had slipped along the ground, and through the grass, and 'round the rocks, into the valley; and which, returning, had given place again to him who now maliciously surveyed the accomplished mission. So low the Traitor had descended in the wanderer's regard, the very sight of him brought terror and recoil. No deed, however simple, wrought by one whose treachery had earned a penalty so dire, could offer one pure motive for its cause.

Thus did Elias reason on the sight he now beheld, and though he heard no words from that far-distant realm, nor knew into what sin the Traitor had induced its fair inhabitants, he felt assured the presence of Beelzebub on that new sphere brought it no good, but only ill. While he thus meditated o'er the scene, he heard a sound he had not heard long since—that of an angel's advent.

No visitant had passed this way since he had come to the deserted spot, where but one Angel stood on guard, and He but for a space. And though the interesting sights without the gate had so engrossed his mind, the sound of a companion angel was most welcome.

It was Gabriel who neared the gate. He bore a gleaming sword, and in his face Elias saw a look of sternness such as Gabriel had never worn before. His was the countenance of outraged love, of wounded friendship, of a holy vengeance that would smite the foe of Him he worshipped.

The approaching Angel paused before the gate, looked out into the mighty chasm that yawned between it and the other realm, then girded up his robes as if to leap beyond the portal. He had not spoken to Elias. He knew not why his loved companion held solitary vigil at this place, but having noted that the legions of Elias proceeded and receded in throne journeys without leader, surmised the fact that penance had been asked of the Archangel for some breach of heavenly duty.

Since Elias had not spoken, Gabriel thought the silence penitential, and had spoken nothing.

Elias, uncrowned and a wanderer, awaited, with humility, a word from him who, by his purity, was a superior. Thus did the friends regard each other silently.

The journeying Angel, having tightly girded his radiant garments,—badges, all, of his office Archangelic—prepared to leap beyond the open gate. Elias saw the intent

with a start, and clutching at the robes of Gabriel, shouted, in agonizing tones, "What wouldst thou do?"

The other calmly made reply: "By The All-Powerful's direction am I sent forth upon an errand to yon distant clime. He sendeth me to mete out justice. Delay me not! 'Tis The All-Powerful's will."

Elias tremblingly drew back while Gabriel leapt into the chasm; then coming closer to the threshold, watched his flight. Long did the Angel journey till at length, alighting in the tragic vale, he sought the bower of the sinners. The guilty pair came forth.

"Full well I know," Elias orally reflected, "that sin has been committed there. The presence of the Traitor; the visit of the reptile to the bower; the vengeful countenance of Gabriel; his hurried errand with a sword; he goes to mete out justice; and if disobedience to The All-Powerful's will doth now meet justice, no power can save these sinners from a dreadful woe."

The Angel with the errand now had faced the guilty pair, and with drawn sword would strike the blow that justice did demand.

The sinners bowed and cringed to wait the expected blow; their arms their heads encircling as though to intercept its fall and lend some slight protection from the stroke. Thus bowed, while waiting for the glittering sword, they did not see the advent of an Angel, Who revoked the word of justice; but he who watched this

drama from the gate beheld that Form, in radiant white, step in between the avenger and the pair, with one hand outstretched to stay the sword, the other held protectingly above the guilty sinners' heads, to lend sweet mercy to the act of justice.

The Interceding Spirit vanished and the rescued sinners turned and fled, while Gabriel followed to the limits of the garden, where, with gleaming, turning sword, he drove the erring beings to the arid wilderness beyond.

And Paradise was silent and deserted; and the light, which o'er this sphere had beamed, now waned, till he, who still held watch in the Celestial realm, but dimly saw the object of his gaze. And, as he stood with streaming eyes, far peering through the gathering gloom, one hand above his brow, the other resting on the towering symbol's side, Elias heard the angels' songs borne faintly from the throne. They sang a theme unheard before in all the Courts of Heaven. He strained his ears to catch the words of this new song of love, and as the chorus swelled in power, he heard repeated o'er and o'er, each repetition grander, till the great dome of Heaven rang with its adoring praise: "O Thou Mighty One, strong to redeem; Thou Who dost atone for sin and shame, hear now Thine angels' praise, O Glorious One! We Thy Great Name upraise, Thou Blessed Son. Brightly Thy mercy's light on sin doth beam; O Thou Mighty One, strong to redeem!"

The dazzling light poured through the open gate and fell upon the darkened sphere; yet though it pierced the heavy gloom and shed a radiance infinite, it cast athwart that sinning realm the shadow of a cross.

CHAPTER X

AN UNARMED HERALD

The penitent Archangel, true to his great desire to find a task whereby he might make right his wrong and prove his love for The All Powerful's Son, still gazed upon the stricken realm that felt the curse its sinfulness had caused. The beings who had listened to the Tempter's voice, and had thereby paid forfeit of their high estate, were now joined in their sorrowful career by many others of their kind; and wandered in the desert places; nor again attempted to regain the valley where was lost their innocence. He, who beheld from Heaven's gate the scenes of this sin-smitten realm, saw in it many changes. The breezes, which had gently stirred the foliage of the garden, to tempests grown, unbridled blew, with fierceness so intense they dashed the puny desert homes to fragments; then strewed them, savagely, along the sand. The mighty rivers which had wound, with graceful curves and tortuous, among the hills and through ravines and under boughs o'erhanging, now often burst their first confines, and, with a maddening torrent, usurped great tracts unrightfully; because of sin, which once had led a mighty Angel in the Heights to burst the confines of his power, and, with ambition foul, attempt to cover, with despotic rule, Celestial tracts not his to claim. And thus did

sin pervade the whole of this terrestrial realm, while its inhabitants and their wrongs increased as time went on.

Great cities dotted, here and there, the hills and plains, with towers and walls surrounding them, while through the tiny gates passed in and out their sinning occupants; and often, while the ages ran, the Archangel, who had once gone to mete out justice to this realm, whose sword was stayed by mercy's hand, proceeded through the open gate to take some revelation to the sphere of The All-Powerful's will.

Now bonded serfs united stood, and passed to liberty between the waters of a sea, which, parting to permit their flight, resumed their place and drowned the foes of them who sought their freedom; while over all this mighty host there hung a cloud which bore the mystic seal of The All-Powerful.

Elias wondered if this throng, by such a sign directed, would cease from sin and praise the Name of Him Who broke their fetters. But once more sorrow filled his soul as he beheld them on the plains prostrate themselves about devices of their own construction, and offer homage to these things which had no power to guide them.

They built a House beneath the cloud that overhung the host, where creatures of the herds, that roamed upon the hillsides near, were led and struck and burned, thus seeming to pay tribute to the Leader Whose praise they made; yet often did the House remain deserted, save by

those whose office it appeared to be to guard the holy spot, while all the thousands of the host bowed down to strange devices of their hands.

The population of this sphere spread ever over larger tracts. The hovering cloud, which had o'erhung the human beings led from bonds, had long since disappeared. Upon the summit of a hill which, with two companions, formed the site of one of these walled cities of the sphere, Elias saw a host at work erecting, with materials borne from distant portions of the realm, a House than which no greater had been built in all this clime. Long did they toil; and when 'twas done, the watcher from the Heights beheld a company of white-robed beings pass within the doors, and then make exit; then re-enter, and again depart, at intervals well measured, while all the hosts, who dwelt upon the mountains which the walls surrounded, made frequent journeys to the House to offer praise, and then, returning to their wonted tasks, bowed down to roughly wrought designs which sat unmoved through all the homage paid them.

Thus did the ages pass, as at the open gate of Heaven, Elias waited for a task to prove his deep contrition.

When all the distant realm was plunged in sin, he scanned most eagerly the length and breadth of the domain in search of some great mission that should call him there; but never had the impulse come to leave the lonely gate.

The angels at The All-Powerful's throne still sang the praises of the Son with themes Elias found most strange. The distant songs came but in fragments to this place, and often did the watcher yearn to catch the entire meaning of the strains. Once, when the burst of praise resounded till the words came clear and plain, he heard this anthem:

"O King, without a peer, do Thou our praises hear, before Thy throne! Ne'er shall our homage cease; our love doth e'er increase; Thou Blessed Prince of Peace, Thou Mighty One!

"Hail to Thee as Thou reignest! Hail to Thee as Thou leavest Thy blest domain! Thou to redeem now goest; to pay the debt Thou owest justice which ever smiteth foes to Thy reign!

"Thou didst the weapon stay, which would the erring slay for their great shame. Thou dost this debt now pay; Thou takest guilt away, that all Thy creatures may honor Thy Name!"

Such were the angels' songs which, drifting to the ears of him that watched, possessed him with anxiety to know the meaning of the theme.

It seemed that The All-Powerful's Son would go to earth to pay a forfeit, and that this price demanded was the claim that justice held on mercy for the deed in that fair garden spot where sin had made its first access to the realm but newly formed.

Louder were borne the songs from Heaven's throne,
for all the legions now did join in mighty anthems.

This, now, the great refrain:

"Thou leavest now Thy throne, Who wouldst for sin
atone, and make men free; to go to earth alone, where,
by Thine Own unknown, hated shalt be!"

Elias groaned in anguish as he heard this song.

"Alone!" he cried. "Alone, and hated! 'Twill be
because they know Him not, the Mighty Sovereign of
all realms. He shall not go alone! Aye, 'tis the time
for my redemption! I shall this Sovereign's herald be;
I shall His way prepare; shall tell the sinners of that
realm how mighty is His power. Then shall His advent
welcome be; nor shall His task be arduous.

"With mighty cries, I shall reveal the coming of a
King, and tell these creatures of the sphere to make Him
room.

"Now to the throne to offer sword, life, all—to be a
herald of my King!"

No faster flight was ever known than that which
marked the journey of Elias. The mighty company of
Heaven, with one voice, paid its adoration at the throne.

The joy that rises from the seat of long continued
sorrow is the highest bliss that men or angels know. So
happy was the Penitent as he fast flew past tens of thou-
sands of these beings, all singing the Redeemer's praise,
he sobbed in joy ecstatic. He made his way among the

throng till he had reached, at length, the nimbus of that glorious light proceeding from the throne. He halted there, not knowing how to seek The All-Powerful's audience in such a storm of praise.

An Angel standing near, who took no part in all this adoration, Who carried neither harp nor sword, beholding him who stood apart in hesitancy, approached and softly said, "Thou art awaited!" Then turning, with no further word, was lost to view in the Celestial radiance of the throne. Elias followed till no further he could go, and kneeling in the glorious light, presented his appeal.

"O Thou All-Powerful; Thou Who ordainest realms, and dost control them with Thy power majestic; Whose mighty words are true; Whose judgments are unerring; Thy Name be praised!

"Behold now kneeling at Thy feet, Elias, the unworthy one, who for his sin didst ask permission to seek some task which might redeem his soul. Departing from Thy throne, with this permission, Thy servant, after long and lonely wanderings, arrived at a deserted gate—deserted save for One Who held solitary guard, and He but for a time. 'Twas at this gate Thy servant stood when Thy new realm first came in view, and through the ages he hath watched the actions of Thy creatures of that sphere.

"They have transgressed Thy laws; aye, from the first, they sinned. Thy servant hath observed most carefully

this sphere to seek his mission, but never hath the impulse come, nor hath a task proposed itself to him meet to repair the wrong, till now.

"The news, in song, was borne to him from those who praise Thy Name continually, that The All-Powerful's Son goes forth alone into that realm, where those to whom He goes shall hate Him, King Immortal, because they know Him not. If they but knew Him and His power, with loving praises they would fall before His feet!

"Send Thou Thy servant, O All-Powerful, The King's way to prepare. I would His herald be, to tell those creatures of the sphere how strong in mercy and in love, how mighty is the majesty of Him Who comes to them; and they shall hear my voice and make a welcome for Thy Son."

"Dost know," The All-Powerful asked, "what mission leads The King to go to earth?"

"'Tis sung," the Penitent replied, "in anthems of the legions, that He goes forth to pay the debt that mercy owes to justice."

"Thou hast heard aright!" the Voice Divine responded; "to pay a debt of greater price than ever yet was known; and thou wouldst be His herald? Thou knowest not what thou askest! This King shall suffer hardships, and whoever would His herald be, must offer all he hath; must count all things but loss! Wouldst thou now go?"

"Make me a herald of The King!" Elias meekly said. "Whatever Thy command, I shall obey; whatever be Thy will, I shall perform it; whatever be the dangers to my King, let me but share them!"

The All-Powerful's voice now loudly spoke in utterance of command.

"Thy prayer is heard! Thou art the herald of The King. Go thou! Make swift thy flight!"

Elias turned and left the holy place, proceeding slowly through the glaring radiance till he reached its outer bounds.

The Angel, Who had spoken to Elias before the wanderer's recent audience at the throne, once more approached, and, gazing long and lovingly into the eyes of him who would do penance, reached forth His hand and took the glittering sword, which hung suspended from the other's girdle; and, casting it upon the pavement white, said to Elias, "The herald of The King shall need no sword!"

The Angel with the mission journeyed swiftly past all the singing legions 'round the throne, his soul stirred to its depths with joy. Farther and faster did he wing his flight till he had reached the gate, where, through the ages, he had stood, a silent watcher.

Now, on the broad threshold he paused, looked upward to the symbol of redemption, looked far below upon his destination, girded up his robes and leapt into the chasm.

But had another angel stood beside the portal, and, witnessing the leap, had drawn close to observe the herald's flight, he would have seen no form upon the pathway to the earth.

PART III

CHAPTER I

THE NAZARITE

"There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name," remonstrated the widow at the bedside. "Why not call him Zacharias, after his father?"

"No," the aged mother maintained, with all the strength she had, "he shall be called John!"

"'Tis most unusual," another ministering neighbor ventured. "What would the priest think of this peculiar name for his child?" And then, after a pause, "Perhaps he might be made to understand and show his disapproval; then surely Elisabeth will reconsider her choice."

The dumb priest sat alone in an adjoining room. His joy was not unmingled with sorrow. The meditation, for which his long silence had given him opportunity, had found a constant theme in the remembered annunciation of the cherished gift. The words of the heavenly messenger had burned their way into this man's soul, and the enforced silence had been but a crucible for their slumbering fire. According to the Angel's message, the Levite's prohibited senses of speech and hearing should return to him "after these things shall have been fulfilled."

"These things" had included the statement that a

marvelous child should be born in the priest's house. The old man fully expected, therefore, that the hour of his son's advent should also be the hour of his own release from silence. But the mystery of birth had been enacted; he had seen the tiny form lying on the mother's breast, and yet he spoke no word.

"These things" included his own act of naming the child, and, with the hope that this performance might conclude the term of his affliction, he had waited patiently the expiration of the eight days which must elapse before the ceremonial rite was administered which gave to the candidate a name. This eighth day had brought a priest to perform the act stipulated in the Levitical ritual to be wrought at this time, and Zacharias, to whom this service was well known, stepped forward at the moment of its propriety to speak the name designed in Heaven to be borne by his son. But the moving lips gave forth no sound. Pale and trembling, the old man left the room.

"These things" must now include the entire ministry of the man, which years should make of the tiny boy.

They found Zacharias with his head in his hands when the neighbors sought him to attempt an explanation of what, to them, was a momentous mistake. The widow from a nearby cottage conducted the experiment of imparting this information to the silent man. Touching him gently to attract his attention, she gestured toward him, speaking his name, so that the motion of her lips

forming a word so familiar might convey the intended idea. Then, pointing to others of the group, in turn, she pronounced their names; now, taking him by the hand, she led Zacharias to the quiet bedroom, and gesturing toward the prostrate form, again named the object of their attention. The pointing finger shifted from the mother to the tiny child, and the widow looked at the priest, inquiringly.

Ah, he knew what she meant! Had he not tried, with all the strength of his enfeebled body, to force that name past his lips?

Impulsively, he went to the little table, grasped a parchment and a pen, and wrote, "His name is John!"

So great was the surprise and exclamation of wonder at this mutual choice made by father and mother, who were denied communication with each other, of a name so unusual, that for the time the priest's changed attitude was unnoticed. Arising hastily, he went to the bedside, and taking the white hand that lay upon the coverlet, softly said, "Elisabeth!"

Then, amid the hush that fell, he stretched forth his hands over the little form of the child of promise, and while tears streamed down his rugged, bronzed face, he pronounced a benediction so stately, so worshipful, so near akin to Divine utterance, that fear fell upon the group, and they stole silently from the house, with pale faces, whispering, "What manner of child shall this be?"

Had this boy been any other than the boy he was—save One—the opening years of his life had been too uneventful to cause a chronicler to give them place. “The greater the gift, the graver the responsibility” was proved to the parents of the wondrous child. At no time could they feel that he really belonged to them. They were merely the honored custodians of his infancy. His destiny and theirs were linked only as the mildewed grain is allied to the great, ear-bearing stalk which stands above it. They were the withered seed, and he, the towering stalk; and he belonged not so much to the seed as to the sunshine and the showers.

Little doubt is there that the maternal instinct of the aged woman, who gave him birth, had been rewarded for her years of patient waiting for a child a thousand times more happily had this son of her later days been but a simple-hearted, very ordinary little boy, than whom any one of the children of the hill country might have evinced more natural precocity; yet the religious instinct of Elisabeth—and the religious instinct of an Israelite reigned, with despotic hand, over the other impulses of the soul—gave her joy ecstatic because the child had come to earth upon a sacred mission.

Zacharias had reached that segment in the cycle of men’s years when but a small, untraveled portion yet remained to unite dotage and childhood. Without question, his declining years had been made happier were his son

to be possessed of those juvenile faculties which would meet a welcome in the now-returning childish fantasies of the old man; yet the priestly—nay, the Israelitish instinct subordinated even the unwilling desires of second childhood, and the Heaven-sent boy was his heart's delight.

He taught him to read while John was but a mere baby. He explained to him the minute details of theocratic law, and, with the precision of age, related over and over again the workings of the ritual, the knowledge of which had been the pride of his life. He led his little son back through ages of history; he explained the mystery of the fall of the progenitors of humanity, to which John listened in rapt attention, while his childish face bore the perplexed features of one trying to recall a fact closely related to the current narration.

He told him the story of Israel's rise, and brought him step by step through the years to their own day. The Nazarite vow, which the Angel had prophesied for John's fulfilment, was chief among the themes of the priest's conversations with his boy. The child had assumed it with all its austerity. The outward badges of this obligation seemed oddly out of place in the little fellow; yet they were worn religiously. He never knew the touch of delicate garments. From the day he was able to toddle about the cottage door, he was clad in rough skins; he was not tempted to taste the grapes in the arbor; the

brown curls, which clustered about his brow, were guarded with care; for he was a Nazarite. The inner evidences of the vow were quite as sacredly contemplated. The child rejected everything that savored of pleasure; happiness he spurned as a sin; all that was arduous he embraced; all that was painful and severe he courted; for he was a Nazarite.

One morning, during his seventh summer, the boy wandered, with tiny footsteps, across the valley, eastward, and up the adjoining slope till he reached the summit of a neighboring hill, and there spent the day gazing far into the east where the rough crags grew rougher relatively with the distance. At evening time, he returned, tired and torn with brambles, to the rough cot he insisted should be his bed. For many days he took this same journey, starting earlier and returning later each time; nor would he tell the object of these wanderings.

From his babyhood, a favorite reply to all questions concerning his actions had been a silent gesture upward toward the sky, and the most the aged pair received in answer to the queries about these journeys was the sight of a tanned, thorn-scarred little hand pointing toward Home.

At length, a journey was taken too long to be completed in a day, and a whole night passed before the wee Nazarite returned; and it was a night of anguish for the father and mother, notwithstanding their resignation to

the child's peculiar life. Not long afterward, three nights passed before the boy returned; and early one morning in autumn, while the aged couple yet slept, this strange character girded his rough garment around his lacerated body and passed out the open door, and down the eastern slope, and over the adjacent hill, and on into the wilderness to prepare the King's Highway.

Second only in pathos to the thorn wounds in the Brow of Mary's Son are the thorn wounds in the little feet of the son of Elisabeth.

CHAPTER II

THE JESHIMON

The sun was rising out of the salty depths of the Dead Sea, and a long, wavering path of crimson already pointed toward his western rest.

The village of Engedi was awaking to resume its monotonous tasks. A woman, with a pitcher upon her shoulder, toiled down the narrow street, returning from the fountain which, bursting from the foot of a huge boulder just westward of the business center of the town, gave life to as many acres as the village covered.

At the door of a little shop, two camels browsed on the tufts of grass which had made bold to spring up along the sides of the dusty street. Both camels wore canopied saddles. Suspended from one saddle was a long garment, presumably the property of him who owned the beast. The burdened woman paused, and, taking the end of the garment in her fingers, examined it critically; then stroked its soft surface with her hand, caressingly. The pressure disengaged the robe, for it had been but carelessly tossed upon the saddle, and it fell to the ground. The woman stooped, hastily, to pick it up; then noticed, on the sleeve, the figure of an eagle embroidered with golden thread.

She rose, impulsively, muttering some imprecation too

deadly to be spoken quite aloud, stamped her dusty sandal angrily upon the innocent device and resumed her journey, often looking backward and scowling fiercely.

Presently, two men emerged from the open door of the shop—one, a Jew, of middle age, the other, a young Roman. The elder man stopped to give some parting directions to one within, while the younger walked to his camel's side and bade her kneel. Something he saw beside him on the ground provoked a merry smile, which increased as his companion joined him. Still regarding the object of his amusement, he called laughingly to the Jew, "Nathan, didst thou ever mark my camel's feet, how curiously they're formed?"

With all seriousness, the Israelite walked to the camel's side.

"Nay," he answered, after critically inspecting the broad foundations of the massive animal, "they do not seem unusual."

"But look thou here, Nathan," pointed the Roman to the cloak, which bore the unmistakable imprint of a small, human foot. "See where she trod?"

"Thou must not blame her too harshly," replied the Jew, now catching the meaning of the jest. "If she is content to bear thy burden all her lifetime, thou shouldst not condemn her if she treads upon thy cloak."

"But upon the Eagle!" the young man interposed, watching the Jew's face, narrowly.

"Aye, the Eagle!" responded the other, with vehemence.

The Roman smiled.

"'Twas but a jest; think no more of it, Nathan."

"Pardon my dullness if I do not laugh with thee at thy jest."

The Israelite turned, with the words, climbed upon his kneeling camel, bade him rise—an action duplicated by the Roman—and the two men rode down the narrow street pondering the recent conversation.

Before another shop, a little distance from the first, five camels stood dreaming, with half-closed eyes, occasionally lifting a great foot to drive away the swarms of pestering flies; yet so slow was this performance that the little tormentors clung all the tighter to their drowsy victims. Five Jews sat waiting on a bench outside the open door, and as Nathan and the Roman approached, they arose and made ready to join the travelers. A quiet salutation passed among the men, and in a short time seven camels, bearing seven hooded housings, each with a stolid occupant, filed singly westward past the fountain and through the defile in the limestone mountain.

As has been said, the fountain alone reclaimed enough territory from the arid waste to furnish a site for Engedi. On every side was desolation. To the east, the Dead Sea lay, a lake of stagnant water; to the north and south, impassable boulders built massive walls, whose purpose

seemed not so much to defend the little town as to imprison it; and westward, stretched the Jeshimon.

The simple mention of this name struck terror to the heart of an Engedian. Half a hundred miles in length, and varying from eight to fifteen miles in width, this barren wilderness marked its eastern limits at the very boulder whence the fountain found its source.

It even claimed a share of these life-giving waters; for at nightfall, when the moonlight glistened on the crags, great, lean beasts, starved and thirsty, crept cautiously through the narrow pass which offered egress from the dreary tomb, and slaked their thirst, and dipped their dusty paws into the cool streams that trickled through the stony paths their constancy had carved.

So past this fountain, through this defile and into this barren wilderness had the caravan journeyed.

Twice a year, the chief merchants of Engedi formed a company to travel to some port of the Great Sea for supplies. Besides a small quantity of camphor, they took nothing with them but money to exchange for purchases of clothing and spices. The wants of Engedians were simple. They made their own clothes, for the most part; they raised in their tiny gardens the food they ate; they wore no jewels. It was most strange that the Jeshimon should need these things, yet it was true that merchants of the little town, built on a single strip of green, looked westward among the rocks for their best cus-

tomers. The Jeshimon, though silent and apparently deserted, was the home of outlaws.

Although the Eagle meant much when stamped upon a disk of gold, its hated form was so repellent to many of the Israelites that they preferred to use some other medium of exchange. Jewelry—bracelets, rings, anklets, brooches, amulets and precious stones—was used instead. Even these trinkets came from Rome, but once in circulation they bore no mark of their despised origin. To bring these things to Engedi was the mission of the young Roman who, now returning, had begged to be one of the party en route Joppa.

For an hour the travelers drowsed in their swinging saddles. The continual screeching of insects alone broke the silence of the mighty tomb. The glittering limestone crags seemed all afire in the glare of the morning sun. Now pursuing the dry flagging of a deserted water-course through its tortuous windings; now emerging where a crumbling wall of the ravine afforded access to a strip of dusty plain, the silent travelers moved on, urging their patient camels to their greatest speed. To linger in the Jeshimon was farthest from the thoughts of any member of the party. The entire journey, from the desert's western limits to the destination at the Great Sea, was not so formidable as the toilsome, gruesome passage through the crags.

The leader was an old man who had traversed this arid

district many times, and his experience had given him this appointment. Feeling a responsibility for the safety of the journey, he kept his eyes and ears alert for danger signals. The caravan now found the ravine, which it had lately entered, growing wider and shallower. But for a great boulder, just ahead, the leader might have gazed upon another strip of ragged plain. The followers, content in his alertness, sat with half-closed eyes, their bodies swaying with the gentle rocking of their bearers.

A wild, melancholy wail broke the stillness of the Jeshimon. The careful leader drew up the halter with a start, and, leaning from his saddle, held up a warning finger to his immediately following companion; then asked, in cautious voice, "Didst hear that cry?"

"Aye," the other answered, "'twas but a prowling jackal."

"Make His paths straight!" came a voice from beyond the boulder.

"'Tis a madman!" cried the leader. "Unsheathe your swords! He may attack us!"

"What means all this, Nathan?"

The Roman, who had brought up the rear of the halting procession, leaned forward to question the man just before him.

"Jesral hath said a madman intercepts the way."

"Then let us move on and see this madman. By Diana, this creeping, crawling place hath nearly robbed me of



my senses! If yon wayfarer is alone in this desert, he is mad, of a surety. Move forward, Nathan! Let us see him."

The request was easily granted, for now the caravan advanced to meet the wild man of the Jeshimon; nor did the sight of him, who stood beside the rugged boulder, belie anticipation. One of two actions was momentarily expected of him; either that he would disappear over the shelving ledges of rock that protruded from the boulder like irregular stair steps, or, animal-like, attack the party. He did neither. Far calmer than any of those who rode forward to meet him with hands on swords, he waited their approach, and seeing the unkempt hermit made no offer of hostility, the company gathered in a small semicircle about him.

"Who art thou?" demanded Jesral. "Canst tell thy name, madman?"

"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness!"

The Roman urged his camel nearer, and signaled her to kneel.

"Thou art a crying voice, then," sneered Jesral; "and what dost thou cry, voice?"

"Prepare ye the way of The King!" solemnly answered the questioned man.

"By my jewels! This is good!" laughed the blue-eyed Gallic. "The great Cæsar hath chosen a new uniform for his heralds. Mark ye his tunic?"



Then, to the hermit, "Thou hast the face of a Jew, man. Doth Cæsar pay thee well for thy service? 'Tis a pity he hath not sent thee to Jerusalem. By Isis, he needs a herald there! Speak, voice! Have the foxes and the bats consented to the coronation?"

The object of derision answered nothing, and the inquisitor continued with his raillery.

"On second thinking, thou hast done well to select this as thy location. Thou wilt hear thy screeching, howling companions acknowledge Cæsar long before thou wouldst gain such result from the graybeards in the Holy City."

This bit of comedy, intended more for the ears of his fellow-travelers than for the uncouth stranger, ended with a boisterous laugh in which the speaker was not joined, the others expressing their estimation of the speech with dark frowns.

The hermit raised his eyes after a time, and with them searched the face of his ridiculer.

"I do not announce Cæsar, thou pagan! Cæsar is naught to me. My King created Cæsar!"

"Ah, thou speakest then of Augustus Cæsar?" with mock gravity. "Hast been so long in these caves thou dost not know the worms are dead that fattened on Augustus? Thou shouldst have known this. Thou art no older than I."

"Nor do I speak of him," the herald answered, quietly, "for him also did my King create."

"Thou art too much for me, voice!

"Take him, Nathan; he is of thy people. Perchance he will tell thee more willingly of his king."

Nathan had taken but little interest in the conversation. He had not yet forgotten the occurrence of the morning. In fact, the Roman's air of pleasantry when he spoke of Israel's subjugation rankled deeply in the Jew's soul. But now, deeming little to be gained by exhibiting an anger which should strain the relations of the party for the remainder of a long journey—tiresome enough without the burden of uncongeniality added to it—the merchant raised himself from his lounging posture, whence he had been surveying the stranger critically, and, tapping the camel on his shaggy neck with the toe of his sandal, leaned forward as the great beast settled into a comfortable position on the sand; then asked, sourly, "Is this thy home, wanderer?"

"Aye, for the time."

"What dost thou eat?"

"Locusts and honey."

"Locusts! By all the gods!" muttered the Roman, with a shudder.

"How long hast thou dwelt here?" continued the questioner, frowning at the interruption.

"I can not tell thee in terms of days. I thought not to count them at first, and there was no use. I have remembered the number of floods through these ravines."

"The number of floods!" Nathan exclaimed, with a surprise which seemed oddly out of place in one habitually stolid. "There are but two floods within the year; surely thou hast not seen many floods!"

"Two score and five," the hermit recalled from his mental memorandum.

An involuntary exclamation of wonder escaped the listeners.

"Of a truth thou art mad," the Roman scoffed, "—a mad liar!"

"Peace!" silenced Nathan, with a gesture, as he might still the prattling of a child; then, to the man of interest, "Hast thou ever visited yonder village, thou locust-eater?" with an indicative nod of the head, eastward.

"I have visited the fountain at night. Further, I have not gone into the village."

The Jews exchanged glances and shuddered.

"Who is this king of whom thou speakest?"

"He is the Maker and Ruler of every land, and He doth now come to rule in the earth."

"Hast ever seen him?" asked Nathan.

After a pause—"Nay!"

The merchant Jew looked toward the Roman with a scowl, as though wishing him out of hearing of his next question to the stranger. Then, leaning forward, as though to lend an air of privacy to the conversation, he

asked, "Thou bearest the features of an Israelite. Hast ever heard of the—" almost a whisper, "—Messiah?"

Without hesitation the hermit answered, "My King is the Messiah."

Nathan started.

"Beware of sacrilege, madman! How knowest thou the Messiah cometh?"

The stranger seemed at a loss for an explanation.

"Hast thou read the parchments?" he asked, at length.

"I am a Jew!"

"Thou hast read them; yet thine answer's words mean nothing. Not every Jew hath read them; thou knowest that."

The Roman forced an irritating laugh. Then, with a glance at Nathan, he drawled, "Destroy not my friend's faith in Israel's knowledge, madman; nor tell him how swiftly these Hebrew scrawls are passing from the memory of men."

"Cease thy noise, idolater!" sternly commanded the leader of the caravan. "Thou art making thyself even more odious than thou art naturally!"

The desert prophet continued.

"Thou hast read the parchments. Then, thou dost recall the words of our father Jacob, at his dying: 'The scepter shall not depart from Judah until Shiloh come!'"

"Alas, wanderer," rejoined Nathan, sadly, "that scep-

ter hath departed long ago. 'Tis nearly thirty years since Judah rendered first tribute to the heathen."

Undaunted by this statement the hermit continued:

"The promised Messiah belongeth to the priesthood. Dost recall the number of years a man must have told before his priestly appointment?"

"Aye, thirty."

"And the Messiah shall soon reveal Himself." Then, impulsively, "Hast thou the parchments with thee?"

"Nay," answered Nathan. "Hold! I have Esaias' prophecy."

The hermit walked quickly to the side of the merchant's camel and extended an open hand. The great beast turned his head and inspected the man, with wide-open eyes, and, lifting his dilated nostrils, sniffed the rough, hairy garment bound about the stranger's limbs.

"Mark how thou carest for that writing!" said Nathan, as he passed the roll into the waiting hand.

The hermit leafed rapidly through the parchments' stiff pages, and having found the passage sought, silently returned the manuscript, with a finger pressed upon the words he wished read.

Nathan took the roll and absorbed himself in its perusal. The other travelers regarded his face with interest. It was some time before the merchant spoke; then, in a strange voice, he asked, "How long dost thou continue to cry in the wilderness?"

"I know not. I must prepare His way!"

"I shall see more of thee!"

The thoughtful Jew spoke to his camel, and he arose. The others followed the action, and silently the leader bade his beast proceed.

Once more Nathan turned to the hermit.

"Peace be upon thy—"

"House!" finished the Roman, as the Jew paused in the familiar valedictory, having realized its unfitness; "Jove, what a house!"

"And thine!" replied the herald, solemnly, ignoring the discourteous interruption.

The caravan moved forward past the rough stranger of the Jeshimon. The Roman waited for Nathan to proceed, then impatiently fell into line, leaving the Jew to follow, which he did; but as he passed the hermit, he leaned over and whispered, "I shall look for the Messiah, and return to thee soon. Do thou await me at this rock on the second day of next new moon.

"May the God of our fathers be with thee!"

"And defend thee!"

CHAPTER III

"FROM ALL JUDEA"

"And thou, Gamaliel, of all men! Thou art the last I did expect to find in this place! No need to ask thy destination."

"Canst not pardon an old man's curiosity, Ithmah?"

"'Tis enough, if all the tales be true, to cause the High Priest an eastward journey. We must be near the spot. Mark yonder pass! One might fancy all Judea was moving into the Jeshimon."

"Thou hast seen but the smallest part, Ithmah," replied the elder man, with gravity. "Look northward!"

"All Jericho!"

"Hast been here before, Ithmah?"

"Nay, by the prophets; I did summon my reluctant courage for this journey with an effort. 'Twould have been more to Judea's liking, methinks, if this thing had happened nearer home. What thinkest thou, Gamaliel, of all thou hast heard?"

"Mine age hath taught me," replied the white-bearded Jew, "that one can not judge anything by rumor. Ask me thy question to-morrow!"

The mind of Ithmah, a young scribe of five and thirty years, whose tact and amiability had placed him in high favor with prominent members of the Sanhedrin, the

monopoly of whose transcriptions he enjoyed, had been the battle-ground of a long struggle between curiosity and professional cares; the belligerent of the first part whetting his sword daily on the marvelous tales that drifted from the wilderness; the warrior of the second part finding his weapons more useless as clients disappeared on Jeshimon journeys. At length, curiosity had stamped out his foe so completely that naught remained for him, who had entertained the contestants, but to follow the victor's leading; which he did.

He started unaccompanied, but went not alone. Had he not known the exact location of the forbidden spot to which he traveled, he need not have inquired; for, as he passed through the east gate of his native city, in the early morning, he found himself one of a company, which, though he had no part in it, revealed by its common topic of conversation its gruesome destination. All along the route, travelers were setting forth, seemingly with a united purpose. The little town of Bethlehem was passed, and as the narrow road veered to the southeast, the highway was seen to be no longer an unfrequented path, but a busy thoroughfare. As far as Ithmah could see before him, were groups of travelers; nor was he in the rear of this strange procession.

It was only a day's journey from Jerusalem into the very heart of the Jeshimon; yet, from the size of the camp immediately outside the confines of the barren region,

which the scribe reached at sunset, it seemed that men, having arrived at ninth, tenth and eleventh hours, had preferred to spend the night without the sepulcher. Ithmah, too, saw wisdom in the plan, and lay down to rest, weary with the day's tramp.

He awoke with the first glimpse of dawn. Already his fellow-travelers were clambering over the rough boulders that formed the desert's western wall. He followed them in silence. After an hour of laborious traveling, he observed, just ahead, the figure of a man he recognized, on instant, as Gamaliel. For a time he followed, making no effort to reduce the distance between them, for the old man's preoccupation with his tiresome journey among the crags afforded the scribe more amusement than he dared betray, when, with feigned surprise, he overtook the lawyer.

"Methought last evening," said Ithmah, leading the conversation hastily away from its recent touch of impertinence, "that should the Emperor desire a census of Judea, it might be taken with more facility in the wilderness than at Jerusalem."

There was a pause before the elder man spoke.

"Carryest thine ink-horn for custom's sake, Ithmah; or dost thou think to solicit a new client?" asked the old man, lightly.

"Nay!" the other responded, in the same vein; "for if the rumors bear the truth, no scribe, who knew the

Cæsars, would care to carry in his wallet the parchments of this client."

A fellow-traveler, stumbling, jostled roughly against the pair, shouting to his companions, "Look yonder!"

Instinctively, the eyes of the scribe and the lawyer followed the man's gesture. In an open space just before them, which had remained hidden until now by jutting rocks, surged a great, ever-moving throng, whose members crowded and pushed each other in an effort to secure better vantage ground near the common center of attention.

Ithmah and Gamaliel paused in wonderment.

"Dost expect to take thy chances in that crowd, Gamaliel?"

"Nay, let us stand here," replied the elder man, pointing to a rock beside them.

The two men climbed wearily up the ragged side of the boulder and once more looked upon the throng.

Upon a rock in the midst of this surging mass, clad in a leathern girdle, his shaggy, knotted hair falling about his shoulders, gigantic in stature, commanding in attitude, marvelously eloquent in voice; stood the prophet of the wilderness.

The climacteric retard and carefully graduated diminishment of volume in the speaker's tones, closing with an appeal which became inaudible to the prominent

visitors from Jerusalem long before the lips ceased moving, proclaimed the address finished.

The throng, which seemed already to have acquired its maximum density, contracted into yet smaller space to give place to the orator, who now stepped with agility from his stone rostrum; then opened a narrow path for him with much rough crowding and elbowing, as he passed silently through the audience. So quickly was this path opened as he proceeded, and so quickly did it close behind him, that the desert prophet strode onward continually the nucleus of a shifting circle. He passed so near the rock upon which Gamaliel and Ithmah stood, they might have touched his sunburnt brow. He did not pause, but kept his course northward—a course at once taken up by those stragglers of the audience, who now found themselves foremost in the pilgrimage, the destination of which was unknown save to its swarthy leader.

"He hath made some announcement of his purpose," said Ithmah, guardedly, to his companion, "else they had not followed him so willingly.

"Hold, man!" (This to a passing follower of the throng.) "Where goeth he now?"

"Wouldst follow him?" asked the man addressed.

"I did but now ask thee a question!" haughtily returned the scribe.

"My question thy answer, then!" rejoined the traveler, with equal abruptness. "He did but say those following him should learn where he doth go, and for what purpose."

"Then to thy question—Nay!" said Ithmah, shortly.

The man scowled, and hurried to rejoin his companions. The white-haired lawyer regarded his young friend's contempt with a smile.

"Thou seemest insulted, Ithmah, that a man shouldst ask thee if thou followest further him thou hast journeyed far to see; yet thine inconsistency, perchance, hath not revealed itself to the wayfarer whom thou didst send away with such impatience." Then, playfully, "Mayhap he thought thy presence here in this wild place was but an accident."

The scribe's scowl lifted at the old man's words, and realizing how vain it was for one to attempt concealment of one's purpose in coming into this desert, the unreasonableness of his irritation dawned upon Ithmah.

"Have pleasure in thy sport, good friend Gamaliel; 'tis true my presence here bewrayeth curiosity; yet, I am thinking, did yon brawny, uncouth stranger ask thee plainly if thou didst expect to follow that motley crowd to nowhere, thou shouldst have answered him with fewer words, and sharper."

"'Tis well, Ithmah; have thy way. Condemn thine old friend to condone thyself, if thou wilt; yet thou knowest

well, thou scribbler, thou wilt follow, as I shall. Behold me now!"

And suiting action to his words, Gamaliel clambered from his pedestal, where, instantly rejoined by Ithmah, both men took up the journey of the disappearing crowd. So they proceeded, bantering each other in good humor, each man attempting to disguise the shame he felt at following the crowd. But neither man being used to the laborious travel of the wilderness, especially when one was retarded in his course by those limitations age prescribes, the conversation grew more serious as the way became more difficult; and when the horizontal sunbeams announced the close of day, there were no more weary travelers in the slumbering camp, scattered for miles along the highway which had now grown less formidable, than the lawyer and the scribe.

At dawn, the procession was in motion, including as its rearguard the two aristocrats from the Holy City. They had not seen the mysterious leader since he passed them, with the scurrying throng, when starting northward. They had merely followed the crowd, confident that the foremost followed the leader.

Trees with scanty foliage by the wayside, withered tufts of grass at intervals along the path, while not suggesting a distinct boundary of the desert, revealed the fact that with less severity had Nature strewn the glistening limestone rocks and drifting sand in this region;

and, by the sixth hour, the throng was traveling through a green valley, which hinted the near proximity of a river.

"Unless mine eyes deceive me, Gamaliel, he hath halted. Mark how the crowd increaseth on yonder hill!"

"We must be near the Jordan," the elder man replied, wearily.

It was true. The leader had halted, and on the grassy slope that overlooked the little river, whose journey to the Dead Sea was all but completed, the tired and dusty thousands massed around a central figure. Eagerly the two friends made their way with haste to join the crowd.

There they heard the prophet preach with matchless oratory, and there saw him administer unto his converts a strange rite, the significance of which attached to the name of John, "The Baptist."

CHAPTER IV

THE HONOR OF THE JORDAN

It was late in the afternoon of the last day of the month of Tebet. Along the western shore of the Jordan River, a few miles from its mouth, a singular character had been preaching and baptizing from early dawn.

In many a little shop in Judea the forge fires, having slumbered low, had passed away while they slept, and what were once living embers were now dead coals with flaky ashes clinging to them; all because the brawny hands, which once had pumped the creaking bellows, were wiping penitential tears from eyes long unused to weeping—eyes that beheld a wondrous throng, whose central figure was John the Baptist.

Many a lamb, with plaintive bleat, had wandered far from its fold and in the brambles on Judea's hills stretched out its quivering little form, and starved and gasped and died—all because its shepherd had forgotten earth, with its responsibilities, to dream of Heaven with its glories so resplendent—day-dreams wrought by the idyllic rhapsodies of John the Baptist.

Many a yellowed parchment lay crumpled and deserted on the floor of luxuriously appointed council chambers in Jerusalem—all because white-bearded seers, who once

droned over the cabalistic portents they contained, paced the western bank of Jordan under fire of stern denunciation from the lips of John the Baptist.

It was late in the afternoon. The roughly clad hermit, with stately mien, had left the river's edge surrounded by the latest of his converts, who, still dripping, joyously sought out their friends to tell them of the potency of this mysterious rite.

The weary Baptist, resuming his wonted stand upon an elevated knoll, would close the day's ministry with a final appeal.

Twice he faced the crowd, and raised his hand as if to suit a gesture to forthcoming words; and once the hand had fallen to his side; and twice the eyes had gazed northward; and once the gesturing hand had risen to the high-arched brow to lend protection from the dazzling sunbeams; then, in a voice inaudible except to those within his immediate reach, he said to one close by him, "Nathan, do thou pass through the throng and separate it that a path be made for an approaching traveler!"

"But, Master," the Jew objected, "they will not give place at my word."

"If thou art pleased to do my bidding, Nathan, go, separate the throng."

The chided disciple left his master's side and, with significant gesture, strode through the crowd which fell back to make him room; nor did it resume its former place

when he had passed, much to his surprise and wonderment, as he returned through the narrow defile walled with human forms.

The prophet was speaking.

"Ye have heard how I saith unto you, 'A King doth come!' I but His herald am.

"Ye stand to hear my words. Most meet is it that ye should stand. Behold me, an unworthy subject of The King, clad in rough garments; with no power save that my King did lend me to proclaim Him; claiming no honor higher than His annunciation.

"When ye shall see my King, bearing in His majesty the honor of the mighty legions which continually do praise His Name; holding in His right hand the power which doth create or destroy at His will; clad in robes whose touch doth heal infirmities—then it is meet that ye should fall upon your faces whilst He speaks; and ye shall fall, so great the might that doth attend my King!"

"Gamaliel!" cried the scribe, clutching at the old man's sleeve, "Gamaliel! Who is this approaching? Never have mine eyes—"

The narrow line of cleavage through the throng had become a broad highway, bounded by wondering faces. So abrupt had become this instant action of the crowd, the two friends were nearly carried off their feet, and Ithmah's exclamation of surprise, half uttered, was unheeded by him to whom it was addressed.

"This is He!" rang out the prophet's powerful tones above the murmurs of surprise.

"This is He!" pointing to the stately figure, slowly walking down the human aisle.

"This is He, of Whom I said, 'After me cometh a Man Which is preferred before me, for He was before me.'

"Behold the Lamb of God, Which taketh away the sin of the world!"

Amazed, the thousands watched the Wondrous Stranger as He approached the prophet, and breathlessly, silently, they viewed the scene that followed.

All now expected to hear a conversation between these men than whom no more mysterious Judea had ever known; and yet the Stranger neither paused nor spoke, but turned, before He reached the knoll, and walked toward the river's edge, the crowd yielding Him ample passage. Then, entering the shallow stream, He stood with bowed head.

The prophet left his grassy platform and walked toward the river as one entranced. At its very edge, he halted. Quite well he knew what was expected. The Stranger had come to receive the rite of baptism. Falling to his knees, the herald softly said, "I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me?"

The Stranger's words were unheard except by those standing at the river's brink.

"Suffer it now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil all the law." And, as He spoke the words, He knelt.

There was a pause before the herald arose. A mighty war was waging within him twixt commanded duty and the knowledge of unfitness to perform it. Then, as if the struggle had ended, the Baptist arose, walked to the kneeling Stranger's side and, dipping his hand into the water, placed it lightly on his Sovereign's head.

The Ordained Man arose, and without further word to him who had performed the rite, walked quickly from the water. Above His Head fluttered a pure white dove, which seemed created in the air.

"This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased!"

The Words seemed to come from Above—calm, stately, majestic—and many a face turned pale, and many a quivering knee gave way to its burden, and the throng was terrified and amazed.

The Anointed King walked rapidly southward along the river bank and the crowd, standing transfixed, watched Him until He disappeared from view. The Baptist staggered up the bank, nervously, and once more took his place upon the knoll.

A passing breeze caught at his rough locks and the crimson of the fading day gleamed on the unshorn head and crowned it with a halo. The crowd breathed deeply of the invigorating breeze. The colors of the dying day, unable to force their way through the blackness of the gathering clouds, faded into a gruesome gray. Another gust of wind, rougher than its heralds, flung aside the

garments of the throng as it passed by. The tree tops careened helplessly in the oncoming gale, while their feathered tenants screamed and beat their tiny wings fiercely in the blast.

The Baptist raised his hand with a signal of dismissal to the throng. Already, those on the outskirts of the crowd had run for refuge to the coverts of the river's bank, and now each sought his own protection from the storm.

The hermit loudly shouted to those of the little group who still clung to him, to seek retreat. They joined the flying crowd. The site of the recent, wondrous spectacle was now deserted save for the swaying form upon the knoll. A mighty, rolling roar of thunder announced the coming of long, jagged streaks of light, which lent a lurid glare to everything within the range of vision, from the seething sky above to the trampled grass at John, the Baptist's feet; then melted into deeper gloom.

The prophet turned, and, rudely battered from his unprotected stand, half ran, half fell toward the river bank; then, battling with the gale, he faced to southward and pushed hurriedly on.

If there was a momentary lull in the tempest, he quickened his pace, and when a louder storm-shriek told the advent of another stinging blow, he smote against the storm with brawny arms, with features tensed, strained, anguished.

There were a few flying drops of rain, that stung like missiles. Thicker and faster and colder, they beat pitilessly upon the hermit; but on he ran; and, as he ran, he called wildly, his mighty voice rising above the deafening roar of the tempest:

"O Thou Mighty King! O Thou, my Ruler, hear!" But his only answer was the mocking shrieks that wailed in the scraggy bushes among the rocks.

The path was growing rougher with every step. Again and again the hermit stumbled and fell headlong on the sharp stones that floored his way. Again and again he arose, bruised and bleeding, to resume his journey, always calling loudly to his King. In the distance, great beasts, battling against the storm, united their wild cries to the perpetual din. In frenzied desperation, the exhausted man threw himself down upon the jagged rocks and, amid sobs which shook his massive body, cried in anguish: "O thou Loving Spirit! Oh, that Thou shouldst spend a night in such a place. I know its terrors; those awful scenes! Do thou, All-Powerful, protect Him!"

Then, in a tumult of wild agony, "'Tis not the beasts, nor loathsome reptiles; 'tis not the hunger, nor the thirst; 'tis not the storm: O Loving King! Beelzebub, Beelzebub is there!

"O Thou All-Powerful, shield Thy Son! My King! My King!"

CHAPTER V

THE SPY

"Machri doth stand without!"

The great Antipas neither moved nor spoke. The guard, clad in Roman tunic, had entered the open door of the tetrarch's private room, where that dignitary lay outstretched on a luxurious divan, attended by a half-dozen obsequious servants.

Having delivered his message, and having received no response, audible or visible, the Roman relaxed the tensed attitude long custom had prescribed for a sentry while speaking to his monarch, and, having satisfied himself that no answer need be expected, turned, without further ceremony, and passed out into the corridor.

A young Jew of thirty years, whose dusty sandals and perspiring face told the story of a journey, leaned wearily against a pillar in the spacious hall. A shadow, flung across the open door, proclaimed the return of the Roman from his errand of announcement.

"He awaits thee—which is to say, he is there, and probably is awake. Do thou enter and see for thyself."

The Jew smiled, though the smile was closely related to a sneer. The annunciator and the announced were boon friends, and neither was entirely free of disloyalty to the idler who lounged in the room beyond the wall.

"He is alive," the Roman added, as his friend moved toward the door; "I marked his breathing."

"Thy servant, Machri!"

The Jew, having thus announced his presence, stood and waited before the royal couch. The vacant stare in the eyes of Antipas remained steadfastly gazing into nowhere. After a little time, he who sought princely audience allowed his glance to wander aimlessly about the room, and, in an unguarded moment, permitted it to stray through the open door, from whence it was hurriedly recalled; and the dusty traveler bowed his head low to hide the operation of certain little imps that drew the corners of his mouth upward into an unwilling smile.

But Antipas was not asleep.

"Thou seemest in a rare good humor! Hast trouble finding voice to speak?"

"I did but wait thy word, my lord!" said Machri, still bowing in an exaggerated obeisance.

"Thou hast the word, then," growled the tetrarch. "Nay, hold!" Raising himself upon one elbow, the speaker waved a gesture of dismissal to the menials. They filed out of the room, and the great door closed noiselessly behind them; this latter action being much appreciated by the Jew.

"What of thy journey? Speed thy words!"

The great Antipas now raised himself to a sitting posture and regarded his subject with some little display of interest.

"I have seen him. He is on the Jordan, a three days' journey from Hammath."

"From Tiberias, thou meanest!"

"Aye, Tiberias; 'twas but a slip of the tongue, my lord."

"Chasten thy tongue, then, Israelite! Proceed! What didst thou think of him?"

"Mine own opinion counts for nothing, my lord."

"Thou hast said it!" the tetrarch responded, testily. "Didst find a crowd about this man?"

"Aye; full five thousand in number."

"Doth any of these five thousand bear a name?" asked the questioner, with a meaning look.

"Aye, my lord," came the ready answer. "The temple was fairly represented."

"Came these droning graybeards to learn or scoff?"

"I know not, my lord."

The tetrarch frowned.

"Thou didst surely listen to their conversation!"

"I did not, my lord."

"Hast thou forgotten thy craft, eavesdropper? Didst think thou wert sent upon a pleasure trip?"

There was no answer.

"Speak, if thou hast aught to say!"

The great Antipas had risen, with a threatening gesture.

Machri stepped back, instinctively. He had been struck before, under circumstances no more grievous.

He spoke hurriedly.

"I saw several of the priests from the temple, and many of the Sanhedrin were there. I did go close to them to hear their words, one with another, but when I did approach to listen, he was speaking."

"Hath then this hermit such a mighty voice thou couldst not hear a conversation at thy side whilst he was speaking?"

"He hath a mighty voice!"

Antipas had resumed his seat; but the cool, evasive reply brought him to his feet again. With clenched hands and distorted features, he faced the Jew and hissed, "Herod Antipas hath no time nor liking for jests with his hirelings! Thou dog of a Jew! Thou spy! Thou lurker in the shadow! Thou pilferer of secrets! If thou hast aught to say, speak!"

Machri cowered.

"Thy servant hath ever done thy bidding. It is naught to him to shield the great ones of the Holy City, but—"

"Make thee haste with thy words, and cease thy dallying!"

The tetrarch had laid his hand upon his sword-hilt, with a significant gesture.

"I bring strange words to thee. I have failed in the telling of them since I did fear thou wouldst not give them credence. Patience, my lord, I will tell thee all.

"Thou didst charge me: 'Go, spy out the hermit of

the Jeshimon; note his audience, his words, his acts'—and bring the truth to thee concerning all.

"Immediately I journeyed southward; nor was I taxed to discover him of whom thou seekest tidings, for any man in Samaria could direct me to the place I sought; and in Judea,—every prattling child in Judea knew where the hermit was.

"As I have told thee, there was a mighty crowd about this man. Remembering thy words, I marked this throng to learn its members. Saw I Gamaliel speaking to Nicodemus ben Gorion and that young scribe of theirs, and I stood near them.

"To this time I had not given attention to the hermit's words, but now, to make appearance of auditor, that the lawyers see not mine interest in their conversation, I remarked the hermit.

'Caught I his words, and, thinking to listen for a little space to learn the manner of his speaking, gave him mine ears. Couldst thou but hear him speak, thou couldst now understand my message!

"Thou wilt not believe me, yet thou hast not known me to be false with thee. Thou sayest I am a spy; thou hast spoken truly, yet never have I spied on thee. Thy servant doth often lie to men; aye, he hath proved treacherous to gain the knowledge he would sell, but never hath he lied to thee. Thou hast said thy servant lurketh in the shadow; my craft doth call for strange devices; thou hast

said well, yet never in thy shadow have I lurked. Believe thy servant! I heard no word from the lips of Gamaliel, nor from any save the hermit's. Once he claimed my attention, I gave no heed to aught else!"

To the speaker's astonishment, the tetrarch listened with rapt interest. In spite of his petulance and outward show of disrespect to Machri, he knew that stealthy young Israelite, while holding truth with a spy's disregard, had never proved unreliable in his dealings with his employer.

Herod's thin lips curved into a scornful smile—a smile which broadened into the nearest approach to genuine good humor the spy had ever seen upon that sneering countenance. An uproarious laugh shook the flabby body of the monarch, and it was some moments before he found voice to speak.

Machri stood in open-mouthed amazement. He had been schooled to expect anything of the vascillating Antipas, but he had never reckoned mirth among these probable phenomena. Mirth belonged to men with souls—to great, strong men of healthy minds and loving hearts. Herod's laugh was a shock to Machri.

"Thou hast told me a great tale, Machri. Thou goest forth a spy; comest back a prophet! Thou hast lost thy position, Machri. Thou shalt no longer be an hired eavesdropper. Thou shalt have a long robe made for thee—"

Here the tetrarch's feelings once more gave way to a tumult of laughter. Then, panting with his unusual

exertion, he shouted, between paroxysms, "Thou shalt stand—in the corridor—and sing psalms! Canst—canst sing, Machri?"

The spy stood motionless.

"Canst sing? Answer me!" The hilarity was giving place to sternness.

Machri traced a figure on the floor with the toe of his sandal and shook his head slowly, while his swarthy face was crimson with shame.

"Thou canst not sing? So much the better; neither can the rest! If thou couldst sing well, thou couldst not act the part. Do thou but get the robe, and bawl forth thy solemn words. If thou dost amuse us, we will pay thee well; if thou dost annoy us, we will—cast thee into the Sea of Tiberias!

"Begone, thou—fool!"

The great Antipas was alone, wearing his usual frown and thinking earnestly.

If a spy, whose maturer years had brought him no impulse worthier than that which led him to steal secrets for the mere sake of the shekels their retailing afforded him, should, at the price of his remunerative position, allow himself to be influenced by a strange prophet, what, indeed, must be the attitude of the simple hearted of Galilee and Perea toward this character? If the subjects of the tetrarch paid homage before this uncouth man, then it was neither the part of policy nor discretion to proclaim

open hostility against him. And yet these mighty crowds and this enthusiasm which attended them were not to be tolerated. There was quite enough religious dissension already, without the infusion of a fanatical heresy which would inevitably deepen sect bitterness and widen the chasm between Jewish leaders. The problem of the strange prophet must be solved carefully.

Antipas seized a sheet of parchment from the table, rolled it tightly in his hands and paced the room. He slapped the table vigorously with the parchment. The door opened, and the entering guard saluted.

"The scribe! At once!"

The white-haired secretary took his place at the table, after perfunctorily performing the usual ceremonial pantomime, placed his inkhorn by his side, with deliberation selected a pen and spreading his wrinkled hand over the white surface of a parchment, which seemed inclined to return to a cylindrical position, swallowed a mighty yawn, and waited a dictation.

The words were uttered painstakingly. After each dictated fragment, there was an ominous scratching on the parchment, and then silence for perhaps a moment—perhaps half an hour. The letter was important.

At length, it was completed and the seal affixed. The scribe was dismissed curtly.

"Go! Send Machri to me!"

A few moments later, the guard announced the spy.

Machri trembled as he stood before the tetrarch, not knowing what indignity had been conjured for his annoyance.

Brief, stern, business-like, Herod handed him the roll.

"Take this to thy friend, the wild man! Place it in his own hand! There will be an answer. Do thou await it! Then return to me with thy best speed! Mind thou dost not linger! Go!"

CHAPTER VI

IN KINGS' PALACES

The sultry days of Elul had wrought few changes in Hammath, but they revolutionized Tiberias; and only a generation had passed since Tiberias had been Hammath—so much for governmental alterations. The citizens of Hammath had met Elul's hot invasion bravely; the residents of Tiberias capitulated without the slightest show of resistance, and fled to the mountains in search of chance breezes.

The palace of Antipas was deserted by its royal occupants and their attendants, and a small garrison of servants reigned. So absolute their rule, there remained no quarter of the mansion unoccupied. Even the luxury of the throne-room of the mighty Herod himself was not wasted; for, in the long, sultry afternoons, Carmi, the old gate-keeper, curled up among the silks of the magnificent divan and slept a dreamless sleep. The repose of one who has no waking thoughts is seldom disturbed by dreams. Had Carmi been possessed of humor, it might be thought he sought to preside in the throne-room after the manner of his absent sovereign; not being capable of humor, Carmi's selection of the couch was rather a matter of animal instinct.

And so it was that the heavy breathing of Carmi was

undisturbed by the rattling of the gate on the afternoon of the tenth of Elul.

The solitary traveler, who would enter the palace gate, had grown impatient. It had meant much for him to tear himself away abruptly from the mighty throng that regarded his every movement with curious interest. Indeed, he had been obliged to steal away under cover of darkness that his departure be unobserved. Whether his courteous summons into the presence of Herod Antipas be the outgrowth of a despot's whim, or a mere subterfuge by which its recipient would unconsciously place his freedom in jeopardy, John the Baptist was not yet aware.

Though obedient ever to civic regulations, and submissive to the authority of rulers, the hermit-herald considered himself under obligation to his King, than which duty was no higher.

The tetrarch's message had been tossed aside without further consideration, had not the prophet felt that his duty compelled the granting of the Herod's wish.

It was a long, tiresome journey to Tiberias; and now, to confront closed gates as a culmination of this unwilling journey, taxed the traveler's patience sorely. He slowly retraced his steps through the quiet street, his head bowed low. An impulse possessed him to return immediately to the thousands which he knew were already devising explanations for his sudden disappearance;

but this impulse was slain by the presentiment that his duty lay in obedience to the tetrarch's summons. Again he returned to the castle gates, and shook them fiercely. An aged Jew, staff in hand, passed him as he stood restlessly awaiting an answer from within. The hermit confronted him.

"Doth none attend these gates?"

The infirm man halted and, with the deliberation of age, replied, "If thou seekest converse with the servants, thou hadst better make thine entrance at the side gate."

"I would speak with the Herod," rejoined the traveler, quickly.

"Then thou hast a journey before thee!" answered the old man, with gratification that he might impart surprising information. "The tetrarch is at the Castle of Machærus."

"Machærus!"

The hermit shouted the word; then said no more. He turned about, quickly, and strode toward the south with gathering speed. Tiberias was soon lost to view and, ere the twilight fell, the Galilean Lake had been skirted to the point where its beach receded to form its southern boundary; the angling road to the southeast, ever nearing the Jordan, was covered to the junction of this stream with the Yarnuk, which entered it from the east.

The night was spent in a little olive grove on the west

bank, near the mouth of the Yarmuk. It was the night of the full moon. The hermit threw himself down upon the damp grass. Night birds were fluttering in their nests. The tiny River murmured against its reluctant journey to the Stagnant Sea. But for these, the place was silent. The hermit gazed, with wide-open eyes, at the shining orb, whose nimbus cut a jagged pathway through the fleecy clouds that hung like sea-foam in the sky. It was a time for thought.

The darkest deeds humanity has ever wrought have been conceived by night. The nearest man's poor, fettered spirit has ever come to God has been by night. The impulses of these lonely, mystic hours of darkness have been dependent, for their themes, upon the angle of their subjects' vision. The shadows and the gloom of earth may feed a low, sin-burdened mind with thoughts full meet for crime. A vision of the open sky, the gleam of stars, the changing gold and silver moonbeams enrich man's soul till all the Heaven-lent imagery of his mind combines, with subtle art, to trace a portrait in fancy's gallery, of The Infinite God—the mighty Prototype of perfect man.

The hermit peered steadfastly into the open sky. He was devoutly thankful for this hour of meditation. Within his soul, two mighty forces had prepared their fittest weapons for a spiritual war. They waited now, with poised spears and hard-clutched shields, the reading of the battle's issue.

From the untanned girdle about his loins, the hermit drew a crumpled roll of parchment, and read it aloud:

“TO JOHN THE BAPTIST, HERMIT; FROM HEROD ANTIPAS, TETRARCH OF PEREA AND GALILEE:

Greeting:—We have learned of thy proficiency in speech, and would hear thee. Unable, by our position, to attend thy words, delivered in thy wonted place, we would invite thee to address us in our own audience-room. He, from whose hand thou dost receive this message, shall bring thine answer.

Given this twentieth day of Ab, by the hand of
EZRA, Scribe.

MACHRI, Messenger.”

A vision rose up before the hermit, as he read; a vision of thousands—the nearest sitting, the farthest standing—all attentive to his words.

The scene shifts, and now he is, in fancy, changed from preacher to baptist; he passes among the kneeling groups of penitents in the shallow stream, pouring the symbol of regeneration on their heads. It was a mighty, Heaven-sent task. He loved it!

Another vision pushed its way into the foreground of the hermit's mind—the vision of a beautifully appointed palace, with courtiers at every hand, his chief auditor a low-browed, gorgeously bedecked monarch.

Unloose now, fighting foes, and rend this saddened spirit!

"Why should I heed this message? What impulse moveth me to turn from those whose souls are being cleansed of sin, to seek out him whose idle mind, aweary with crime, doth wish to pass a dragging hour more quickly with a feast of curiosity? I, to the vulture's banquet? And how am I to know what promptings lead me thither? Are they of good or ill? Am I a reed, shaken in the wind, that I should bend before a passing breeze? Is it the glory of the King's house that doth impel me there? Oh, wretched state! Do Thou, All-Powerful, direct me! Teach me my highest duty! My life is in Thy hands!"

The prophet buried his unkempt head in his great, tanned, thorn-scarred arms, and gave himself to anguished prayer; and after hours of pleading, fell asleep.

The early morning sun beamed on a traveler of massive mold, who walked rapidly along the narrow path on the west bank of the Jordan. The darkness had passed and dawn had come; not only for his visible world, but for his mental, as well. With the dawn had come decision.

The heat grew stifling, but the hermit continued his journey southward. Late in the afternoon he crossed the Galilean boundary of Samaria. Frequent groups of strangers passed him on his way, and eyed him in silent wonderment. They invariably paused and held brief conversations, emphasized with many gestures toward the retreating figure. It was impossible that he should recognize all the men and women who had heard him

preach; but none, who had ever seen this man, failed in remembering him.

The heat was growing less oppressive, and the roadway teemed with travelers who had waited for this hour to make their journeys. Had the mind of John the Baptist been less abstracted, he might have noted, with surprise, how great a number were traveling in the direction opposite his own; might have heard their anxious inquiries, each of the other, as they passed him; but he did not remark these things until he came face to face with a yet larger group, led by Nathan, his first disciple.

"Master! Where hast thou been? We have searched for thee vainly. Where, now, dost thou go? We will follow thee!"

The hermit was now surrounded by his devotees. Searching the questioner with his eyes, he asked, slowly, "Where goest thou, Nathan?"

"We would follow thee, Master!"

"Nay; but where wert thou going?"

Nathan hesitated.

"To—Capernaum!" he responded, timidly.

"And why to Capernaum?" asked the hermit, sternly.

The words stung the loyal disciple, for they hinted at a charge of unfaithfulness, and the elder Jew hung his head; then, with trembling voice, he answered, "Good Master, thou didst not tell us where or why thou wentest forth, and when thou camest not back, we searched for thee.

And then the tidings came of the Galilean, and we thought perhaps thou wert with Him."

"The Galilean?" asked the hermit, in amazement; "and what of him?"

"Hast thou not heard?" Nathan questioned, excitedly.

"Nay!"

"A Nazarene doth work wonders in Galilee. 'Twas told by one of Cana that this One did but raise His hand over a well of water and those, who came with pitchers, drew up wine."

"Did he, of Cana, tell thee this?" asked the interested prophet.

"Nay, Good Master; it was but noised about the crowd."

"Didst hear the name of this wonder-worker?"

"Jesus!" replied a member of the group, quickly, anxious to be a participant in the conversation.

"Aye," confirmed Nathan, soberly, "Jesus, of Nazareth!"

John the Baptist trembled with agitation.

"Make haste on thy journey, then!"

"Nathan, come apart; I would speak to thee!"

The two men stepped aside.

"Do thou" the hermit said, "seek out The Messiah, as thou promised long ago when first we met in the Jeshimon; for Jesus, of Nazareth, is He! Thou hast seen Him; thou shalt not mistake Him. Watch thou well what He doeth, and when thou hast aught to tell

me, do thou come to the Castle of Machærus, for there I shall be.

"Peace be upon thee!"

"May the blessing of the Lord God of Israel attend thee!" the elder man responded.

The hermit resumed his journey. His decision in the problem of the night previous had been established. The wisdom of it was now confirmed. He had, indeed, "prepared the way," and the thousands journeying northward trod it. There was but a moment of sadness in the herald's heart, and then his thoughts gave place to the issues confronting him. He saw little of the familiar scenery along the Jordan as he passed, for he was preparing a sermon for the tetrarch of Perea and Galilee. He even passed the dusty grass-plot where he had preached daily, for weeks, without more than a casual glance. He covered the dreary stretch toward the Jeshimon, over which he had followed his King on that awful night when all the powers of darkness seemed united in an effort to dismantle his reason.

And now he came to a bridge which spanned the Jordan, and crossed to the eastern side. The way grew rougher as he rounded the northern beach of the Dead Sea. An hour afterward, he saw the sunlight glinting on the walls of his destination.

There was but one unkempt man in Palestine welcome

in the Castle of Machærus, and he now stood at the gate, which immediately opened to admit him. His brief inquiry was answered affirmatively by the guard, and without further question or remark he followed him up the broad steps, through the great doors and into the corridor of the massive building.

There his conductor paused, and, whispering a command to another guard within, retraced his steps.

The second guard beckoned to the hermit; then turned and led the way past many doors until he came to the last on the right of the corridor. Motioning to his follower to wait, the guard entered. In a moment, he returned, and said, briefly, yet respectfully, "The tetrarch grants thee audience!"

John the Baptist entered. Near an open window to the southward, Herod Antipas sat. There was a table by his side, on which lay scattered rolls of parchment.

The two men faced each other silently; nor did the gaze of either withdraw from the other for a time. The hermit bowed slightly, and the bow was as courteously returned by the tetrarch, much to his own surprise.

There was a vacant chair on the opposite side of the table. The great Antipas shifted his position and motioned toward it. The hermit ignored the invitation and remained standing. He was the first to break the silence.

In low, well-measured accents, that sent the tetrarch's

pulses bounding with admiration, the hermit said, quietly, "I have come in answer to thy summons. Doth it please thee to tell me at what hour it seemeth meet to thee to grant me audience?"

In answer to such question from any of his subordinates, however princely, the tetrarch would have sneered and said, "Await my word!"

To the cool, deliberate question of the hermit, he replied, thoughtfully, "To-morrow morning, if it pleaseth thee. The guard shall make provision for thy care till then."

John the Baptist needed no further word of dismissal and, bowing acquiescence, left the room.

The guard, without the door, led the way up a stone stair to the second floor, and, pointing to an open door, stood in fixed attitude while the guest passed within.

The room had not been prepared to meet the peculiar wishes of a Nazarite. It abounded in luxury. The hermit looked about him at the tapestries, the silken cushions, the deeply carved furniture; then stepped again into the corridor, retraced his steps down the stairway toward the light which streamed through the great western door, down the broad steps, and to the gate, and out.

The night he spent on a hilltop overlooking the Dead Sea.

Shortly after sunrise he started toward the castle,

arriving about two hours later at the gate, where he was admitted without question. This time he went unattended to the great door. The Roman guard led the way through the first passage from the left of the corridor, and John the Baptist found himself in a large audience-room where were assembled more than a score of richly clad court attendants. He regarded them with little interest, while they whispered and smiled and exchanged significant glances.

He had halted just within the room, but now paced back and forth, slowly, with bowed head. A murmur passed among the little company as a young woman of twenty years entered; and all arose and remained standing until she had taken a seat at the east side of the room, quite apart from the others.

No sooner had the courtiers been seated than they arose again and made low obeisances in the direction of the door, through which Herod Antipas was entering, with his queen. The royal pair crossed the room and occupied chairs which stood upon an elevated dais, near which sat the young woman whose entrance had been marked by the company's expression of respect.

And now the hermit looked inquiringly toward the tetrarch, who answered the silent question with, "We await thy words!"

John the Baptist strode to the very center of the room, from which position he could face his royal auditors

on the right, and the company of court attendants directly before him. One slight inclination of the head sufficed for a salutation to all.

"I am the herald of a King!

"To thee" (turning to Herod) "it seemeth strange a King's forerunner should appear clad in a hermit's uncouth garb; and in your thoughts" (facing the courtiers) "ye either disbelieve my words concerning mine appointment, or, believing them, do think the King, so meanly heralded, durst make no claim to royalty; yet these rough garments and this unshorn hair are but the badges of a vow by me confirmed, yet not by me devised, for 'twas decreed before my birth that I should be a Nazarite.

"And since the power that doth attend those in authority—whatever be the breadth or limit of their rule—maintaineth general likeness, where'er found, thou" (to the Herod, again) "canst not fail to interest thyself, who art one in authority, in Him Whose Kingship I declare."

And Herod Antipas did interest himself in the herald's words. Leaning far forward, his chin in his hand, regarding the speaker with rapt attention, the Herod lost no syllable of the hermit's discourse.

Once more the speaker faced the courtiers, and with graceful gesture toward them, continued.

"Ye owe allegiance to the ruler in whose presence ye now sit."

The right hand pointed toward the throne.

"And thou dost owe allegiance to the Cæsar; nor doth my King disturb the alliances of men. Ye," (to the courtiers) "and thou" (to the tetrarch) "might all acknowledge yourselves subjects of the King I do now herald; nor would your sometime obligation to those whose authority surpasseth yours be thus annulled.

"My King doth come from Heaven!

"Among the cherished writings of the Hebrews, which from the father to the son have been inherited through these many ages past, one parchment, oldest of them all, doth speak concerning men of long ago, who built a tower upon the Plains of Shinar, with no intention other than that this high construction should yield access to the abode of Him they thought to be their King. In the mind of man, there hath been so implanted conception of a Ruler Infinite, that he, unconsciously, doth seek to know His nature and His attributes.

"The ancient parchment further doth indite the history of the tower. Confusion fell upon the builders, and they spake with many tongues. Thus, failing in their understanding of each other's words, with sorrowful reluctance they did leave their mighty task unfinished.

"And now ye say, after centuries of homage to a myriad gods of various names and functions, that Cæsar, in whom all the glory of the earth doth seem to center, containeth, in his nature, the attributes and qualities of

divinity. Thus ye, like those long-since departed tower builders of Shinar's Plains, do seek to reach the Infinite with human hands. Your new devices are more true than those with which the Shinar dwellers sought their King, for ye have determined that one man must hold within himself both power of earth and Heaven. Ye have determined well, yet ye know not this man!

"Man cometh not to God through Cæsar; God cometh unto men through One, Who hath now appeared on earth; and 'tis of Him I speak."

The herald grew more eloquent as he portrayed the mission of his King to earth; how He had come to condemn sin, in whomsoever found; how the world, though groaning in error's bonds till now, should shake, from highest mountain peak to farthest ocean depth, under the Sovereign's stern denunciation.

Tighter, and more tightly still, the speaker drew the subtle bands of condemnation around his company of auditors. The general abuses of the time, which comprehended common sins, he railed upon with scorn. Now, focusing his attention on the tetrarch, who sat transfixed, he drew upon a mighty store of tact, and spoke of those responsibilities attaching to a crown; how they, well exercised, could purify a realm, or how, abused, would lead to national vice.

And now, the bands grew tighter yet and with a mighty voice, the hermit recounted, for the cowering,

trembling Herod the vilest epochs of that ruler's sinful life.

Without a quaver, the eloquent voice proceeded. The piercing gaze of John the Baptist's eyes now included Herod's queen. She shook with agitation. The air seemed stifling and oppressive to the royal auditors. There was a pause; and then, with loud, stern tones, a single sentence shot forth from the hermit's lips, each syllable of which rang like a hammer-blow, each driven home with mighty gesture toward the quaking tetrarch!

The queen arose, pale and unnerved. Her white lips moved in utterance of command. Her shaking arm attempted a gesture toward the speaker, but it fell to her side, as though palsied.

The king, with blanched countenance, staggered to his feet, and the courtiers, with angry shouts, surrounded the hermit, who stood coolly surveying the scene.

It seemed that none dared touch the man. All crowded close to him and shouted orders to each other. At length, two guards made bold to catch his arms and lead him from the room. He went with them, submissively. They pushed him before them down a narrow stair. The air grew damper with each descending step. He noted, as he passed, the white mold in the crevices of the wall. The floor was reached, and guards and prisoner groped their way along the hall.

They halted. A great, stone door creaked slowly on rusted hinges. The prisoner was pushed within.

Again the door swung slowly, and met the wall with a dull sound that threw a hollow echo through the dungeon. The place was silent. The hermit cast himself upon the clammy floor, and sobbed.

The public ministry of John the Baptist had been completed.

CHAPTER VII

MORE THAN A PROPHET

A single rectangular bar of sunlight, two feet in breadth by one in thickness, had traveled slowly near the southern wall, from the western to the eastern side of the dungeon, seventy-five times.

On the morning of the first day of Kislev, the prisoner went to the white stone door of his cell and, taking a smooth piece of red sandstone from his wallet, added one tiny mark to a long row of similar marks; then, tapping each lightly with the stone, that the enumeration be accurate, he counted all. There were seventy-six.

He turned again to the door; with the palm of his left hand, erased some characters from a little space and set down three numbers in a column, drew a line and placed the result beneath it. This latter he erased; once more he wrote the same result below the line. The little problem might have been solved easily without the figures, but the calculator wanted to be accurate. He took three strides to the southern boundary of his quarters. His head penetrated the bar of sunlight, which turned his thick, brown locks to ropes of gold. His thoughts still lingered on his recent mathematical demonstration, and he murmured to himself, "The first day of Kislev!"

Each of the seventy-five days preceding had been precisely like all the others. Three times each day, for seventy-five days, a guard had unlocked the great, stone door; had entered, quietly; had placed food upon the floor; had departed, without a word; and the door had closed after him with a dull sound that threw a hollow echo through the dungeon. On seventy-five evenings, the hermit had stretched out his massive form on the damp floor, and slept.

Had the prisoner been any other than who he was, the guard, carrying the coarse meal into the dungeon on the tenth day of the man's incarceration, had left the great, stone door open as he passed out, shuddering. But damp floors and moldy walls had no terror for John the Baptist. He was a Nazarite.

The Castle of Machærus, or such part of it as stood above the surface of the ground, was a scene of stirring activity on this opening day of the month of Kislev, for Herod Antipas, and his family, accompanied by their court attendants, were preparing for a journey northward, the destination of which was Tiberias. By mid-afternoon preparations had been completed and a caravan of no mean length was setting forth from the castle gates.

The tetrarch leaned far forward from the hooded housing of his great, white camel, and gave a few parting orders to a guard, who, feeling keenly the importance of his responsibility, was answering each brief command with

low bows and many expressions of his thorough comprehension of his master's wishes. The ruler drew back among the cushions, and it seemed that, at last, the final details of leave-taking had been arranged. The command to him who held the halter of the beast was no sooner uttered than it was followed by another, still sharper, and the Herod leaned once more from the silken folds of the canopy and beckoned the guard to come closer.

"One word more with thee! How fares thy prisoner?"

"Seems he well, my lord!"

"To what extent have been his murmurings?"

"He hath never spoken to me, my lord."

"Aye, 'tis like him! Thy prisoner is a strange man. Omri hath told me that certain Jews have besought him at the gate to admit them that they might plead with us for converse with the prisoner. Mayhap thou knowest this."

"Aye, my lord," the guard admitted.

"Do thou tell Omri," continued the tetrarch, lowering his voice, "that should any yet appear seeking audience with this man, he shall be admitted. And do thou, Marcus, hereafter leave the dungeon door open, and but close the passage at the stair.

"One other thing! On the table in our private room, thou wilt find several large rolls of parchment, written in Hebrew. Do thou take them to the hermit. Give him also some blank parchments and pens."

The eyebrows of Marcus lifted, and a quizzical expression displaced his servile passivity of countenance.

The tetrarch's alert eye noted the change in the guard's face.

He hastened to explain.

"Unless thou furnishest some diversion for this man, he goeth mad!

"Mind thou forgettest not to admit his friends! Do thou also give them food. Whatever kindness thou dost think to grant thy prisoner, perform it; yet let not him escape, for on the day that he appeareth again in Galilee, thou diest!"

The guard bowed in acknowledgment of all his ruler had spoken.

The caravan proceeded northward.

John the Baptist was spending his first eventful day since the morning when he had been ushered with such haste from an angry crowd in the audience-room of the castle. He had looked at the guard with surprise and wonderment when that official had appeared in the late afternoon. The rectangular bar of sunlight needed to have passed two more crevices in the wall before the guard's arrival with the evening meal. New amazement arose in the prisoner's mind when the guard had spoken. The lonely man started at the sound of a human voice. It had been a long time since he had heard another speak.

"The tetrarch hath ordered these to be given thee,"

said Marcus, offering John the Baptist an armful of parchments, "and these," handing him the pens.

"Give thou my thanks to the tetrarch," answered the hermit, grasping the parchments, eagerly, and with undisguised gratitude.

"I can not do that for thee," drawled the Roman, "unless I follow the tetrarch into Galilee; and thou wouldst not have me do that, for who then would care for thee?"

Both men smiled.

"Do thou accept my thanks, then," came the full tones of the voice that had stirred the souls of thousands.

The Roman murmured something, inaudibly. He should have liked to have stayed longer and said more, having seen how deep was the prisoner's gratitude bestowed upon him. But this feeling of philanthropy was outweighed by the importance he conceived to be attached to his responsibility, so he turned and left the dungeon, with stately steps, and passed out into the dark hall, leaving the door open.

The prisoner called.

"Forgettest thou thy duty?"

There was a pause; and the guard returned, and answered, with an assumption of indifference, "Thy quarters have been extended by the tetrarch's orders. The door at the stairway will be closed. Thou art permitted to occupy any chamber on this floor. Thou

wilt find none of them—commodious,” this with a smile, “yet some are dryer and have more light than this. Do thou choose!”

Though John the Baptist was a Nazarite in every detail of that word’s meaning, the austerity of his life had been voluntary, until the time of his imprisonment. To be caged in a dungeon was no more to his liking than it might have been to one of larger desires for pleasure. He accepted this extension of his limits with unconcealed enjoyment; nor had one moment elapsed, after the iron door to the stair passage had been closed, until the prisoner was executing a self-conducted tour through the different rooms of the great basement.

After peering into a half dozen open doors, he decided that he had spent seventy-five days in the moldiest, dampest spot Machærus afforded. He chose, after some deliberation, a room that seemed to him to present the fewest unpleasant characteristics, if, indeed, any could be said to claim but few, and removed his new possessions to it. The room was at the southeast corner. He remembered that the tetrarch’s private room was directly above it. Instead of one tiny window, there were four. Enough light entered through these apertures to enable one to read with ease, and, to his great surprise and joy, the hermit had found a table in the corner and by it a very dusty chair.

Thus installed in his new quarters, while they would

have sent a shudder through a visitor, John the Baptist spent the happiest hour he had known for many weeks.

The first day of Kislev was still more eventful for the prisoner.

The Galilean tetrarch might have smiled grimly had he known that the three dusty travelers who had stood aside, bowing low, though unregarded, while his caravan passed, were so soon to accept the newly proffered hospitality of Machærus.

Omri frowned, darkly, as he opened the gate. The new order was nothing to his taste. The strangers were silently conducted down the stair and told curtly to seek their friend; after which the iron door had cut off what seemed to be the solitary source of light. The men stood still for some moments, enveloped in total darkness; then, tiny sunbeams, struggling through the narrow crevices, reflected on the damp floor of an open room just opposite.

Nathan called.

"Master! Where art thou?"

To witness this meeting were a sacrilege.

Some moments later, four men sat in a little circle in John the Baptist's cell. Nathan was the spokesman for the visiting party, although the others, Amos and Semei, frequently interrupted his narrative with details omitted by the speaker, or added to his animated description of marvelous events confirmatory interjections.

The miracles were related first; the substance of the

sermons later. The herald listened far into the night to stories told of the Man of Nazareth—his King.

These men had seen the palsied arise from his couch and bear it home; had witnessed the curing of all manner of afflictions. It seemed that this Galilean Wonder-worker was leaving a broad track of health and happiness as He proceeded through the northern province. Whoever was in sorrow or pain, found in this Mighty Man a friend. The hermit fell asleep pondering the narration he had heard.

The first shaft of light had no sooner entered the dungeon than the prisoner awoke his companions, impatient to resume the conversation which, to him, was so vitally important.

The morning meal was finished, and there was a brief silence after Nathan's long story of the miraculous restoration of a blind man's sight.

The herald spoke.

"Hast ever talked with the Messiah, Nathan?"

"Yea, good Master! Once—"

The loyal disciple was about to launch forth on the recounting of an incident, but was interrupted.

"Did the Messiah ever speak to thee of—me?"

Nathan would have given worlds to have been able to answer that question affirmatively.

There was a pathetic, pleading expression in the hermit's eyes as he awaited the reply that brought a sob into Nathan's throat.

He answered, at length, hesitatingly, "The Messiah mayeth not have known I were thy disciple, good Master!"

The herald's eyes looked far away as he replied, softly, "The Messiah knoweth all things!"

Amos thought to dispel the cloud of sadness on the herald's face.

"The Messiah knoweth thou art in prison, Master. 'Twas once discussed by some, in His Presence."

John the Baptist seemed interested.

"And what did the Messiah say?" he asked, hurriedly.

And Amos wished he had not volunteered his statement. He consumed so much time in an attempt to devise an evasive answer that the significant wave of the herald's hand, mutely suggesting dismissal of the subject, relieved him of further suspense.

In the afternoon, the prisoner suggested to his friends that they take a walk in the sunshine, as their voluntary confinement was an unnecessary hardship. They protested, but he insisted, and for an hour the hermit was alone in the dungeon, while his three disciples walked slowly along the stony path before the castle.

The same subject furnished meditation for the prisoner that claimed first place in the consideration of his friends; and yet, the meditation and the conversation concerned widely different phases of the issue.

As the three disciples retraced their steps toward the castle, silence followed a fragmentary conclusion to the discussion.

"I can not understand it!" said Semei.

"And He hath proved so firm a Friend to others!" added Amos.

"Nor hath He a mightier friend than John the Baptist!" Nathan rejoined, sadly.

The prisoner heard the rattling of the iron door and raised himself from the position he had held for an hour, his face buried in the great arms that rested on the table. There was anguish written in his features.

He arose to greet his friends. They entered silently, with serious faces. The keen eyes of John the Baptist noted the gloom that rested, heavily, upon his disciples, and sought to lift it with an attempt at cheerfulness.

"The birds still sing?"

Nathan answered, slowly, sadly:

"Nay, good Master!"

One more attempt to scatter the clouds.

"And the sun shineth no more?"

"No more, Master!"

The herald raised his arm in pointing gesture toward the tiny strips of light that clambered up the eastern wall, in the southern corner of the dungeon.

"The sun shineth in this cell, Nathan."

The disciple continued the employment of the figure.

"Yea, it seemeth to have shone more brightly on thee, in this dungeon, than on us, outside the gates."

"Why thy depressed spirit, friend?"

Nathan was silent. Amos replied for him.

"Thou must know the truth, Master. We have been speaking of the Nazarene, and His treatment of thee!"

The stronger man held up a warning finger, but Amos continued, impatiently:

"Nay, bid me not be silent! We love thee! Thou hast given thy life to announce this One as King, and He hath seemed most Kingly; He hath healed diseases and wrought most marvelous works; yet why should He, so full of sympathy and tenderness, neglect thee, who hath done for Him more than any man in Israel?"

"I can not understand it!" confirmed Semei, with emotion.

The far-away gaze in John the Baptist's eyes remained steadfast. Then, recalling his thoughts from their long flight, he replied slowly, addressing himself to the group:

"Do ye believe He is the Messiah?"

Nathan, as usual, was spokesman.

"His deeds of wonder, good Master, proclaim Him a Mighty Man, than Whom hath been no mightier; and but for this thing of which we speak, I would believe Him the Messiah. Yet, if He be the Messiah, how doth He treat thee thus? Thou art His herald, and He knoweth thou dost languish in prison. Aye, Master, more! When we would leave His side to come to thee, I asked Him if any tidings He would send to thee—"

The listener was much agitated, and regarded the speaker with interest intense.

"And He did pause some time before replying; then saith He, 'Nay!' and turned about to speak to others."

The tiniest flicker of a smile lighted the herald's face, to the astonishment of his disciples.

At length he spoke.

"My King is mighty in love. Reflect thou, Nathan, and thou shalt recall His words, His looks. Thou hast never known Him to commit one unloving deed. Thou hast been unjust to Him! I but His herald am! Why should He come to me, or grant me a release from bonds? Didst thou not tell me that He saith, 'Blessed are ye, when men persecute you?'"

"Yea," responded Nathan, quickly, "and on that day He also saith, 'Men do not light a candle and hide it!'"

"'Tis well," replied the prisoner. "The Messiah hath spoken truly. Men do not light a candle and hide it!"

The slender shafts of sunshine, that had climbed far up the eastern wall, had paled and died. The speaker noted the ebbing light and based his next remark upon it.

"But God doth light a candle and hide it!"

There were wakeful hours that night for all who lay on the dungeon floor. John the Baptist had conceived a plan to restore his friends' mental peace. After the morning salutations had been exchanged, he presented it.

"Amos, do thou and Semei go again into Galilee and learn more of the Messiah. Your unbelief hath pained me sorely. Ye wilt find Him attentive to your words; and,

if ye still doubt His appointment, ask Him, plainly, if He be the Messiah! Return ye, then, to me.

"Nathan, do thou stay! Our friends may bear each other company, and they will not need thee."

So used to obeying the commanding voice were the disciples of the Nazarite, that the two commissioned men did not linger once the order had been uttered. After a hasty farewell, they started upon their mission into Galilee.

"Nathan," said John the Baptist after the great, iron door had closed the stair passage, "tell me more of the Messiah's words to men."

"I will, good Master.

"On that day, of which I have told thee many things before, the Messiah saith, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are they that mourn; and blessed are they that do hunger and thirst after righteousness!'"

The prisoner arose and slowly paced the cell.

The disciple continued:

"'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.'"

The hermit-prophet stopped, in one of his short journeys toward the northern wall, and waited.

"'Blessed are they—'"

The prisoner resumed his march.

"'Who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.'"

The two men were face to face now, and Nathan noticed

that John the Baptist's eyes were filled with tears. It was the first time he had ever seen his master so deeply moved.

There was a long silence. The herald spoke.

"What doth the Messiah say of The All,—of the God of Israel?"

"He saith, 'Men shall pray unto Him, saying, Our Father—' "

"Our Father!" the herald echoed.

"Yea, good Master; 'Our Father, Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in Heaven—' "

The lifted hand begged mutely for silence. The great figure strode rapidly back and forth through the dungeon. After a little time, the agitated man paused near the table and, taking a sheet of parchment, spread it out before him and said, in broken voice, "Nathan, do thou repeat that prayer—slowly."

The disciple did as he was bidden, and dictated the entire petition he had learned at the feet of the Galilean. When it was finished, the writer took up the parchment and paced, slowly, along the southern wall, pondering the prayer of his King.

A few miles north of Nain, in Galilee, there was collected, on a hillside, a mighty throng.

To those who had always lived in districts where the population was scattered, this assemblage, spread out, as

it was, upon the slope, which only intensified its size, seemed to contain hundreds of thousands of men and women.

An old lawyer from Jerusalem remarked to a young man by his side, as they toiled up the slope, that there were no fewer than five thousand in the throng.

The younger man spoke.

"Dost note our destination? Methinks if we had planned to be observed of this crowd, we might not have approached from a direction more advantageous."

"'Tis true, Ithmah. Perchance every visitor from Judea hath not yet remarked to his neighbor that curiosity is a contagion that doth infect all grades of men. Let us make a wide detour here, that we may pass around the throng and view this spectacle from the summit."

"I did not think, good friend Gamaliel, that thy failing vision could discern a single spot unoccupied upon yon crest; but thou shalt lead the way. Thine age granteth thee best judgment."

The distinguished travelers from Jerusalem turned to the right. The two tired Jews, immediately following them, hesitated for a moment, exchanged a few words, hurriedly, and continued their course upward—a course which terminated at the little knoll on which the Speaker stood facing the great audience before Him, which extended over the entire hillside, and so densely packed that not a spot of earth was visible. The hill seemed to be built of human forms.

The men that formed the little group about the knoll exchanged whispered salutations with the herald's disciples, as they approached.

One quietly came nearer them, and asked, softly, "Didst thou see him, Amos?"

"Aye, Andrew, he is yet at Machærus!"

The other shook his head sadly.

The eloquent tones of the Man of Nazareth continued; now pleading; now denouncing; always mastering—while the throng stood as motionless as though chiseled in relief upon the hillside.

The thoughts of Amos were in a tumult of excitement. It had been arranged between him and his companion that he should be the spokesman when it came to the consideration of the issue that had brought them there.

How dared he face this Man and ask that question! Yet, however difficult it was, the question must be asked. The Presence of this Mighty Man so overpowered him, he began to search his mind for some excuse or explanation which he might offer as an apology for the effrontery of his inquiry, and a plan suggested itself to him. He had come from John the Baptist; and John the Baptist had told him to ask that question.

The Speaker had paused. Surely this was the time for the presentation of the inquiry. The two disciples of the herald stepped forward and faced the Wonder-worker. Amos felt his heart pounding fiercely; his lips were parched, and his hands quivered.

"Lord, if Thou wilt," he asked, breathlessly, "answer for us a question. John the Baptist bade us go to Thee and say, 'Art Thou the Messiah, or do we look for another?' "

The King's answer was brief and kindly.

"Go, and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them."

The disciples were about to turn away, but they were not satisfied. The question of their lips had been answered, but the question of their hearts was as mysterious as ever.

Again the matchless voice was speaking, and to them.

The Speaker's searching eyes seemed to peer into their inmost thoughts and read the secret of their wavering faith, and their almost rebellion against His attitude toward their imprisoned friend.

"And blessed is he, whosoever is not offended in Me!"

Amos and Semei stood transfixed. The carefully concealed secret of their doubt had been read, and, though their long-pondered question remained unanswered, the resigned expression of their faces revealed that they were willing to let mystery remain mystery, since it was the Messiah's will.

They bowed low, in acknowledgment of the words, and slipping quietly from the group, departed.

The Mighty Galilean meditated for a moment before He continued His address to the throng. Though knowing well His herald's faith remained unchanged, He realized that the crowd, or such part of it as overheard the recent conversation, would think the sturdy prophet of the Jeshimon to be wrestling with doubt. This thought must be dispelled.

"What went ye out in the wilderness to see? A reed, shaken with the wind?"

He paused, and the silence was oppressive. Still more impetuously, He demanded, "But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses!"

Another pause, and another question.

"But what went ye out for to see? A prophet?"

Here, at last, was an inquiry that met ready response. An enthusiastic murmur of affirmation came from the throng.

The Speaker noted it, and continued with earnestness:

"Yea, I say unto you,—and MORE THAN A PROPHET. This is He, of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send My Messenger before Thy face, which shall prepare Thy way before Thee.'

"Verily, I say unto you, among them that are born of women, there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist!

"Notwithstanding, he that is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he!"

CHAPTER VIII

RELEASED

It was high noon at the Castle of Machærus, on the twenty-ninth day of Elul. Peals of laughter followed merry banter and frequent jest in the richly appareled groups that walked back and forth through the broad corridor. The rooms were all thrown open and the castle had been transformed into a great play-house. Even the door to the private chamber of the tetrarch stood ajar, and many passed in and out, with smiling faces. The ruler himself had cast aside his habitual sternness and entered into the joy of his guests with a benevolent air of patronage. It was seldom that the tetrarch allowed his subordinates to see a smile upon his usually scowling visage, but he had ordered a special dispensation on this twenty-ninth day of Elul, for it was his birthday.

The invited guests included all his diplomatic servants of Perea and Galilee, to which list had been added many boon friends from Rome. It was a notable occasion, and Antipas would make the most of it. In preparation for the event, a great caravan had preceded the royal party from Tiberias, laden with luxuries which might intensify the manifest hospitality of Machærus; and now the eventful day had come, and the distinguished visitors were filling every moment of it with pleasure for their host.

Marcus had slipped quietly through the laughing groups on trifling errands all during the morning, and now, remembering an accustomed duty, proceeded to the busy kitchen, where he needed not to announce his errand. He was handed a tray of food, with which he departed along the corridor and down the narrow stairway. He unlocked the great, iron door with the dexterity of long practice. Closing it behind him, as he passed through, he groped the length of the damp hall and entered a dimly lighted cell, farthest on the right of the passage.

"How fares it with thee to-day, friend Marcus?"

He, who spoke, was a man of massive proportions, but the hollow cheeks and sunken eyes told, only too plainly, the story of fast-approaching dissolution. The face had once been tanned and swarthy, but now it was very white; the thick matted hair about the temples had turned from brown to gray. It would have been difficult to recognize the prisoner as John the Baptist,—the sometime prophet of the Jeshimon—yet this was he. The retarding physical vigor of the imprisoned man only brought out his mighty personality into stronger relief.

Day by day, as the Roman guard grew more intimate with the lonely man, he had become more interested in the themes which had actuated the hermit's ministry; and many months before, Marcus had accepted the new faith and had been baptized—he, himself, bearing the earthly symbol employed in the rite's administration to John the Baptist's cell.

The devotee found his teacher a more pathetic sight every day; and so apprehensive had he become concerning the prisoner's health that often, in the late hours of the night, his tiny lantern in his hand, he would steal softly down the narrow stairway to see if the man he loved needed his attention.

Marcus placed the tray upon the table and replied to the cheery question:

"Well, good Master, and busy! We have merry guests to-day. Perchance thou hast heard the confusion."

"Aye, Marcus, I did hear much laughter and song. Hast thou an explanation for this gaiety?"

"It is the Herod's birthday, Master. To-night he serveth a banquet in the audience-room."

"Thou must be on thy way, then, good friend. Thou wilt be needed."

The guard departed, with a smile, and the prisoner was alone. The simple meal was soon finished, and the seldom interrupted meditation was continued.

The lonely man often spoke audibly as he pursued his accustomed beat along the southern wall, and the burden of his thoughts were summed up in the spoken fragments: "I am the herald of a King! The All-Powerful bade me go; prepare the King's highway! What yet remaineth for me?" And thus the prisoner trod many weary miles, over a tortuous road, through the long afternoon. It had been a long time since he had felt able for so much exer-

tion; but to-day he was restless, nervous and excited, though from no apparent cause.

The sunbeams on the eastern wall had nearly reached the crevice that announced the time for the evening meal. A few moments later, the familiar sound of an iron door striking a stone wall came to the prisoner's ears.

Marcus forced a smile for his friend. The haggard expression of John the Baptist's face had more fitly brought tears than smiles.

"Good friend Marcus, thou hast been kind to me!"

The pale man laid his nervous hand upon the guard's shoulder, paternally.

"If aught should happen to me, Marcus, do thou keep these parchments. Thou canst not read them; they are not written in thy tongue; but keep them for thy friend's sake."

"Why speakest thou thus, good Master?" asked the guard, in a strained voice, lest he betray his emotion.

"Art thou ill?"

"Nay, Marcus, not ill; but—"

There was a momentary hesitation.

"—But men have died in prisons, good friend!"

The Roman hung his head and passed his silken sleeve across his eyes.

"Be not depressed, Marcus. It may be but a fancy; and, if it should be true, do thou be happy because of my release."

It was midnight.

The prisoner was roughly shaken from a sound sleep. He stared, bewildered, into the eyes of Marcus.

"Master!" The subdued voice was trembling with agitation.

"Master! Make haste! Come with me!"

"What wouldst thou do, Marcus?"

"Come! Thy life! They would take it! The Herod hath ordered thee killed!"

The prisoner sat up quickly.

"How knowest thou this, Marcus?"

"I was in waiting in the room; I heard the words; thou art to be slain this night! Come! Make thee haste! The door is open! We may pass unobserved! Come!"

The guard had half dragged the prisoner to the dungeon door. Loud shouts of applause echoed through the great corridor above and re-echoed in the narrow hall beneath it.

"Marcus, thou art a faithful friend! Thou wouldst take thy life in thy hands for me; yet, I durst not go! Leave me, good Marcus; they must not find thee here!"

"But they will kill thee, Master!"

"'Tis well; I shall be released. Go thou! Remember thy King! Be true to thy faith! Go, quickly!"

The guard cried in anguish, threw his arms about the prisoner and whispered, "Farewell!"

John the Baptist was alone, but not for long.

Once more the opening door of the stair passage admitted the maudlin shouts of the riotous. The dim rays of a lantern grew brighter, and the sound of footsteps louder, in the hall.

The prisoner stood motionless in the center of the cell.

The massive form of a Roman guard loomed up in the doorway. In one hand he held a lantern, in the other a sword. The sleeves of his robe were rolled to the elbow, revealing the hard, knotted muscles of his forearm.

The Roman spoke.

"Art thou John the Baptist?"

"Aye!"

The guard hesitated. He was not unused to bloody sights, but something in the quiet demeanor of the prisoner made him faint-hearted. Summoning his brutality with an effort, he asked sternly, "Art thou afraid to die?"

"Nay!" the other answered, without a tremor.

"'Tis my duty to execute an order of the Herod. Art thou ready?"

There was silence for a moment.

"What wouldst thou have me do?"

"Kneel!" came the ready response.

The condemned paced back and forth through the cell—twice; then stopped before his executioner and dropped to his knees.

He heard a rustle of silk and saw a bright-colored garment thrown aside on the flagging; then, clasping his hands before him, he began in full, confident tones:

"Our Father, Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is—"

Late in the afternoon of the thirtieth of Elul, an exhausted traveler, clad in Roman garb, arrived in Jericho; and, after a short consultation with three men he sought, he returned with them to the Castle of Machærus.

The already repentant ruler overlooked the guard's breach of discipline and gave order that the three strangers be permitted to visit the dungeon.

They entered the gloomy cavern, silently, and wept as they reverently gathered up the thick brown and silver locks of hair that lay scattered on the floor.

The body was gone.

After some hurried inquiries of the guards, Marcus led the way to a ravine a half-mile south of the castle, and there, in the brambles and briers, they found the object of their search.

When they left the spot, it was marked by a lonely grave.

"And they went and told Jesus."

PART IV

CHAPTER I

A VISION OF CALVARY

There was a swiftly passing view of gray stone towers; of moonbeams' bright reflection on the sea; of vaporous clouds, whose forms mere shadows seemed; and now of open sky, made radiant by the brilliancy of stars.

With rapid flight, an Angel passed amid these changing scenes, and ever upward through the night he journeyed with the ecstasy of freedom infinite.

At length, the gleaming luster of the sky's illuminations, countless, gave place and dimmed before one constant beam that shone from far—a guide, unerring, to the traveler returning Home.

Though distance minimized the breadth of this Celestial shaft of light and made it seem but semblance of a mighty star, the Angel, traveling in its gleaming track, could see within the dazzling ray the outline of the mystic symbol of the gate; and on this fact he pondered that wayfarers, journeying to the realm of The All-Powerful, might be confident of their direction did they descry within the light's effulgence the shadow of a cross.

And now the Angel in his flight more slowly soared. 'Twas with an effort he did check his furious speed, for

ever since his passing o'er the towers and seas and clouds of earth, a subtle power had led him on his brightly lighted course.

He listened with his utmost concentration. There had come the faintest echo of a strain, which seemed to cling like perfume to the pathway of the light. It came again, so faintly the Archangel had not heard it were he not listening with keen intent. The glorious strain, now once established in the Angel's mind, increased in volume as the listener resumed his faster flight.

The radiant beam now grew more broad, as nearer to its source the Angel flew. Its definite shape, now clearly manifest, was that of an arched gateway. 'Twas the first time that Elias, the Archangel, had viewed the Temple of the Infinite from a point without its confines; and he marveled at the vision of pure white and glistening walls, surmounted with high towers of richest gems, that flashed and gleamed with colors rare and wonderful.

At length, Elias reached the gate.

Song billows surged like mighty waves, and on their crests the King's Name and His power were borne.

The Angel knelt upon the gate's broad threshold and leaned his head against the symbol.

Wondrous crescendos gained, with bounds, the climaxes of Heaven's highest praise. Now, voices hushed, the harps' chords smote, and rolling, pealing harmonies, each gloriously augmenting its precedent, o'erwhelmed the

lately exiled worshipper now clinging to the cross. Into the final chord was slurred—one mighty harp, the contribution offering—a single note which, forcing its seraphic strength into the very midst of this now ebbing flood of sound, by sheer might raised the Heavenly strain into the key next higher, and from this chord the angels chose a newer note of praise. Again an anthem surged from throats attuned; again the Sovereign's Name was lifted high and borne on waves of song.

Content to kneel—his mission wrought, his soul enraptured—Elias listened to the anthems of the hosts. No impulse bade him journey to the throne. The subtle power which had impelled him through the sky to gain the gate had left him at the cross, and knowing now no guiding motive but this power, the Angel waited its return.

Long did he kneel—how long he knew not—his mighty spirit throbbing with the glorious angels' songs.

A feeling now o'ercame him, ne'er experienced. He sobbed, and grasped the symbol in his new-found emotion. Some mighty power had wrought a change in this Celestial music. Was it discordant? No! He raised his head and listened with an intent keener. Oh, what piteous sorrow rode upon this tremulous sea of song! It sobbed! It pleaded, moaned and with a final, tearful cry, it ebbed; and Heaven was silent.

The Angel staggered to his feet, his radiant face now

terrified. What awful thing had come upon the realm Celestial?

He faced about. Till now, he had forgotten earth; but this keen sorrow kindled his remembrance. He gazed intently on the sphere. Were his Angelic eyes deceived? A stifled sob rose to his lips. He stepped still closer to the threshold's edge. He raised his mighty arm in abject frenzy at the sight; then, falling on his face, he twined his arms about his head and, quivering, lay outstretched.

Beelzebub had built an earthly emblem of his sin, like to the one in Heaven, and just outside the Holy City's gate it stood, upraised, borne thence upon the mighty shoulders of the now enthroned King.

But victory's cost was dear.

The Sovereign's face was drawn with pain, and crimson with the blood that, from the thorn wounds in His brow, streamed down.

Great, jagged rents, rough nails encircling, drew shapeless regal hands that ruled the world, though pinioned.

Such was the sight Elias viewed from the gateway of the City Glorious.

Filled with surpassing grief, he now lay trembling. Would Heaven e'er again be joyous? Had harps and voices of the hosts been stilled for aye?

Long did oppressive silence The All-Powerful's realm

pervade, as if the wondrous City were deserted of its radiant legions.

A mighty trumpet-blast resounded from the throne! Elias started, rose to his knee and listened. A storm of joy swept harp and heartstrings of the hosts. Waves merged in floods of glorious, rapturous song.

The pæan of triumphant praise ascended in gigantic leaps to gain a climax ne'er attained, and bounded past the limits of all adoration ever rendered; till he who listened at the gate, with hands hard pressed against his brow, unable to endure the wild, tumultuous strain, cried loudly in delirious ecstasy.

And now he drew, half shrinking, to the threshold, and looked once more upon the sphere.

He clasped his hands and sobbed, in joy, "He liveth! King Immortal!"

A Radiant Angel stood before the entrance of a tomb.
He was the Risen King!

He raised His glorious face and peered into the sky.
The welcoming anthem swept through Heaven's gate:
"Oh, ever-living, Mighty King, Who in pain didst sinners save, Thou hast robbed of death its sting; Thou hast vict'ry o'er the grave!

'Return, Resplendent Prince of Peace! Come, Thy hosts await Thy word! Hear our songs as they increase! Thou Mighty King! Thou Risen Lord!"

CHAPTER II

RECLAIMED

Ten thousand times ten thousand gleaming troops the distant, shimmering light revealed. The matchless sight struck dumb and motionless the waiting Angel at the gate. With loudly stricken harps, and voices raised in praise, the white-robed throng drew ever nearer to the tragic spot where shriven sin's eternal emblem stood—a silent sentinel.

Elias hovered closely to the adamantine wall and shrank back, terrified.

On, on, they came, their homage gaining volume, till the sound rebounded, with immeasurable power, from the turrets and the towers of Heaven's jeweled wall.

The hosts of Gabriel were leading all, and, at their head, the great Archangel flew, his glittering crown reflecting gorgeous colors as its gems drank in the pure white light of Infinite radiance; then, fountain-like, strewed many tinted, starry fragments on the path.

The Archangelic leader girt his robes and passed the symbol. The foremost legions followed both the action and the glittering path of him, than whose loved leadership they never had another known.

Michael and his joyous, singing hosts, were followed by the troops of Raphael.

Onward they flew, Archangels and their legions, and following all, there came a leaderless commandery.

The Angel, leaning 'gainst the wall, bowed low his head, and, with his mighty arms, locked from his sight the vision of his uncommanded hosts. He longed to take his sometime place, but dared not move—he had no sword, no crown.

And thus the entire company of Heaven went forth along the pathway of the cross-enshadowed light that beamed upon the rescued sphere.

When all had gone, Elias once more took his stand upon the threshold. The sky was filled with angels' forms, and all the universe was ringing with exultant praise.

Far, far below—upon a mountain of the realm redeemed—the King Immortal stood, surrounded by a company of earthlings. He raised His arms, as if in benediction; and now smiled answer to the angels' call.

He was ascending!

The hosts, drawn up in order of their passing through the gate, awaited His approach—their glorious welcome ever swelling in its grandeur.

The King, with radiant garments clad, neared, reached and passed the singing myriads, proceeding on His course to Heaven, while all the legions, turning where they stood, with flight most swift did follow in His gleaming wake.

Thus, in the order of procession, the legions of Elias foremost flew; which once were last, now first appeared.

